

CHANGING THE SUBJECT:

A BOTTOM-UP ACCOUNT OF OCCUPY WALL STREET IN NEW YORK CITY

BY RUTH MILKMAN, STEPHANIE LUCE AND PENNY LEWIS



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Occupy Wall Street (OWS) suddenly burst into public view on September 17, 2011 when a group of about 2,000 protestors assembled in lower Manhattan and occupied a previously obscure “privately owned public space” called Zuccotti Park. Although the occupation initially attracted little attention, reports on it soon proliferated on the Internet and through social media, and after a week it made worldwide headlines. As word spread, similar occupations popped up across the United States and around the world. By mid-October demonstrations were underway or planned for 951 cities in 82 countries (Tedmanson 2011).

The Occupy phenomenon riveted the media and the public for the next two months, until November 15, when the New York Police Department (NYPD) forcibly evicted the inhabitants of Zuccotti Park, one in a wave of such evictions in cities across the country. OWS fragmented in the wake of the evictions, but has since reappeared in new arenas. It is still too early to assess its long-term impact, but at this writing, more than a year after the evictions, Occupy’s impact on political discourse and on participants themselves remains palpable.

Where did OWS come from? Who were the protesters? What motivated them to join this new movement? And why did the occupations gain such enormous traction with the media and the wider public? We investigated those questions through in-depth interviews with 25 core Occupy activists as well as a representative survey of 729 people who participated in an OWS-sponsored May 1, 2012 rally and march. Our research is confined to New York City, where the movement began and home to its main target: Wall Street. Although the dynamics of Occupy in other cities may differ in some respects, we hope that our analysis will contribute to understanding the larger Occupy movement in the United States.

One of our key findings is that the Occupy movement has both a pre-history and an enduring impact. We are uncertain as to whether it marks the beginning of a new cycle of protest in the United States, as some have argued (Piven 2012) but we disagree with those commentators who characterize it as an ephemeral “flash” movement (Plotke 2012). We view the history of OWS as an historical arc, with the Zuccotti Park occupation at its peak. As we detail below, it has legible roots in earlier social movements, and, post-occupation, the issues Occupy focused on

and the distinctive form it assumed continue to affect the political landscape.

OWS was not a spontaneous movement that appeared out of nowhere. It was carefully planned by a group of experienced political activists, newly inspired by the Arab Spring and the surge of mass protest around the world in the first half of 2011. Although the OWS encampment in New York lasted only about two months, its impact, and that of the broader Occupy movement, continues to reverberate in at least three respects. First, although veteran activists were instrumental in planning the occupations, they also attracted numerous other participants who had little or no previous experience with political protest. Many of these individuals were deeply radicalized by their participation in Occupy and will likely continue on a life path that includes some type of progressive political activism.

Secondly, as many other commentators have noted, Occupy transformed U.S. political discourse. It elevated the issue of growing economic inequality to the center of public attention, and also highlighted the creators and beneficiaries of that inequality: “the 1%,” the wealthy elites whose interests were opposed to those of the other 99% of the population. To a degree unprecedented in recent public memory, social class became a central focus of political debate.

Thirdly, OWS networks survived the evictions and have resurfaced in a variety of different contexts. Occupy activists have been visible in recent New York City labor and community organizing efforts, and have also been active as “Occupy” in various contexts. Most notably, Occupy Sandy organized tens of thousands of relief workers in New York City in the wake of “Superstorm Sandy,” attracting a new wave of media attention. As Nathan Schneider (2012c) suggests, “Occupy After Occupy” has become “a productively subdivided movement of movements.”

In this report we offer a bottom-up account of the Occupy movement in New York City, drawing on interviews with activists as well as our survey of OWS

supporters who participated in the May 1, 2012 rally and march. Many other observers have analyzed the Occupy movement in books, articles and blogs. We hope to contribute to this growing literature, offering a window into the perspectives of core activists as well as a profile of New Yorkers who continued to actively support OWS six months after the eviction of Zuccotti Park.

Our interviews took place between February and July 2012 with a convenience sample of 25 activists in New York Occupy, many of whom were high-profile figures in the movement. Interviewees’ roles in OWS ranged from facilitation, to planning direct actions, to outreach, and to participation in various OWS Working Groups. Most devoted themselves full-time to these activities for at least a few months, although some were involved in a more limited way. Several were part of the pre-September 17 Occupy planning process; others joined the protests later in the fall. They span a range of OWS Working Groups and capture the movement’s age, gender and racial/ethnic diversity as well.¹

Interviewees ranged in age from 23 to 69 (in 2012), but most were in their twenties or thirties. Most were white, but the group included several people of color. Ten of the 25 were female. Nearly all were college educated; about a third also had postgraduate degrees. The vast majority had significant pre-OWS activist experience, although for a few Occupy was their first serious involvement in political protest. They all offered rich insights into the purpose and meaning of OWS from an insider’s perspective. (Appendix A lists the interviewees’ names and basic biographical information.)

We also report here on the findings of the survey we conducted on May 1, 2012, during a large rally at Manhattan’s Union Square and the march to Wall Street that immediately followed. The rally and march, co-sponsored by labor unions and immigrant rights

¹ Our convenience sample is not fully representative of the active core of Occupy Wall Street. In particular, it includes relatively few newly politicized activists, and does not capture the full range of political tendencies in the movement.

groups along with OWS, attracted thousands of Occupy supporters and many longtime political activists.² This was one of the last major New York City demonstrations of Occupy supporters, held nearly six months after the NYPD eviction of Zuccotti Park.³

In fielding the survey, we used a sampling methodology developed and widely deployed in Europe for the study of large protest demonstrations (Walgrave 2007; Walgrave and Verhulst 2011), which allowed us to obtain a representative sample of the rally and march participants. We surveyed a total of 729 people who took the time to attend the May 1 rally and/or march, more than half of whom were “actively involved” in OWS. The results include a demographic profile of New York City Occupy participants and supporters, along with data on their political identities, organizational affiliations and previous activism, and on the specific concerns that led them to support OWS.

Although some participants in the march attended because of their affiliations with unions and immigrant rights groups, nearly all of survey respondents (97 percent) responded affirmatively when asked, “Do you consider yourself a supporter of the Occupy movement?” This particular march may have had a higher representation of New York City’s veteran progressive activists than some of the mass demonstrations supporting OWS during the occupation, although we have no systematic data on which to make such a comparison. In any case, on May 1, 2012, many core Occupy activists participated in the rally and march alongside the larger population of supporters, although others are missing from the survey because they chose to engage in other protest activities that day or, in a few cases, had been arrested

by the police shortly before May 1 and thus were absent. With these caveats in mind, we also report below on a subgroup of 405 respondents (56 percent of the total) who were “actively involved” in OWS, a category based on the number of Occupy-related activities they reported.⁴

To our knowledge, no one else has attempted to field a representative survey of OWS participants and supporters.⁵ The media regularly reported on data collected by professional pollsters about attitudes toward the Occupy movement among the general public; our survey is different in that its goal was to capture active supporters of the movement. Our effort more closely resembles two large-scale on-line surveys of OWS participants and supporters, in which respondents were self-selected. Both those surveys have much larger numbers of respondents than our survey, but they do not claim to be representative.⁶ (See Appendix B for further details on our survey methodology.)

⁴ These 405 “actively involved” respondents were those who reported that they had participated in at least six of the following OWS activities: (a) visiting the Occupy camp at Zuccotti Park; (b) visiting another Occupy camp; (c) living in an Occupy camp; (d) attending an OWS General Assembly meeting; (e) monitoring Occupy events or meeting online; (f) taking part in an Occupy working group; (g) marching in earlier Occupy protests; (h) participating in another Occupy direct action; (i) being arrested for Occupy-related activities; (j) posting about Occupy on social media; (k) donating money, food, or goods to a camp; (l) another activity not elsewhere listed.

⁵ Two exceptions are polls conducted of protesters in Zuccotti Park during October 2011. One was conducted by Fordham University’s Costa Panagopolous, reported in “Occupy Protesters Down on Obama: Survey Finds,” *New York Times* October 21, 2011. <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/28/protesters-at-occupy-wall-street-disapprove-of-obama-a-survey-finds/> The results can be found at: http://www.fordham.edu/images/academics/graduate_schools/gsas/elections_and_campaign/occupy%20wall%20street%20survey%20results%20102611.pdf Another poll was described by Douglas Shoen in, “Polling the Occupy Wall Street Crowd,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 19, 2011. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204479504576637082965745362.html> The sampling method used in both these polls is unclear, and Shoen has been criticized for misrepresenting his own data. For critiques and access to the data from Schoen’s survey, see: <http://lbo-news.com/2011/10/23/taking-the-measure-of-ows/> and <http://www.capitalnewyork.com/article/culture/2011/10/3790409/survey-many-occupy-wall-street-protesters-are-unhappy-democrats-who> In addition, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press conducted a valuable survey of public attitudes toward Occupy, available at: <http://www.people-press.org/2011/10/24/public-divided-over-occupy-wall-street-movement/>

⁶ See the Occupy Research Network survey at <http://www.occupyresearch.net/2012/09/18/orgs-data-facet-browser/> and the survey by Hector Cordero-Guzman: <http://occupywallst.org/media/pdf/OWS-profile1-10-18-11-sent-v2-HRCG.pdf>

² For details on the May Day planning, see Schneider 2012b.

³ Although no official estimates of the number of participants are available for the various demonstrations held in support of OWS, unofficial estimates suggest that the major ones ranged from 10,000 to over 35,000. By all accounts, the May 1, 2012 march was smaller than the November 17, 2011 demonstration protesting the eviction of Zuccotti Park, but much larger than the September 17, 2012 demonstration held on the one-year anniversary of the occupation.

Based on the interviews and the survey (and in some cases additional data from other sources), we came to the following conclusions:

- Highly educated young adults were overrepresented among OWS activists and supporters, a group with limited ethnic/racial or class diversity.
- Many OWS activists and supporters were underemployed and/or had recently experienced layoffs or job loss; many were carrying substantial debt, especially those under 30. The issues our respondents cited in explaining their support for Occupy often reflected these personal experiences of economic hardship.
- Most OWS activists and supporters were deeply skeptical of the mainstream political system as an effective vehicle for social change. For some, this skepticism intensified after the election of Barack Obama in 2008 failed to produce the changes they had been led to expect.
- Despite being disillusioned with mainstream politics, many OWS activists and supporters remain politically active and civically engaged.
- The occupation of Zuccotti Park had a pre-history, with strong links to previous U.S. social movements, as well as a post-history, with activities continuing long after the eviction of the Park.
- OWS activists saw themselves as part of a global movement, linked to the Arab Spring and movements in Europe like that of the Spanish indignados, as well as to earlier protest movements in the United States.
- The New York City OWS was consistently non-violent, although this was the result of pragmatism rather than principle for many core activists.
- OWS was committed to non-hierarchical “horizontalism.” This organizational form, as well as the structure of the occupation itself, were self-consciously politically prefigurative.
- OWS was able to attract supporters with a wide variety of specific concerns, many of whom had not worked together before. This was in large part because it made no formal “demands,” and united around the “We Are the 99%” slogan.
- Occupy brought inequality into the mainstream of U.S. political debate, changing the national conversation.
- OWS was organized mainly by politically experienced activists, but it also created new political subjects: young people with limited or no previous involvement in protest movements, who were transformed by their experiences and developed a commitment to working for social change.



Michael Gould-Wartofsky

OCCUPY WALL STREET'S EMERGENCE

A variety of activists responded to the July 2011 Adbusters on-line call for a “Tahrir moment” in downtown Manhattan on September 17, 2011, the anniversary of the signing of the U.S. constitution. This dovetailed with similar plans for protests directed at Wall Street and in D.C. that were already underway.⁷ The open nature of the Adbusters call meant that whatever happened on September 17th would reflect a degree of spontaneity, but the action itself was carefully planned.

In late July and August, various forces came together in a series of meetings to plan the action. These took the form of General Assemblies (GAs) in which anyone could participate, which would continue to meet in the park during the occupation itself. GAs were the movement's only official decision-making

body; in addition, working groups were set up to focus on specific tasks.

The GA meetings that took place in the summer were devoted to discussion of how to go about taking public space in lower Manhattan, in close proximity to Wall Street,

as well as to how best to frame the protest. Meeting in various downtown locations a sizeable core gathered weekly to plan the action. Participants at this stage included both young political activists and older veterans of the anti-corporate globalization protests and other late 20th and early 21st century social movements, as well as an assortment of politically-minded artists, writers, and students.

⁷ Nathan Schneider reported that a group of activists and organizations, including Veterans for Peace, had started planning in April 2011 for an occupation of Freedom Plaza in Washington, D.C. on October 6, 2011. In addition, a group affiliated with Anonymous attempted an occupation of Zuccotti Park on June 14, 2011 (Schneider 2012a).

Some of those who engaged in the planning for September 17 had personally witnessed or participated in the dramatic public protests in Egypt, Greece and Spain earlier in 2011; others were not physically present at those events but had monitored them closely. The planning group also included many people who had been active in recent protests inside the United States, most importantly the Madison, Wisconsin uprising in defense of collective bargaining rights, the New York May 2011 protests targeting Wall Street, and “Bloombergville,” an encampment at New York City Hall opposing budget cuts and austerity measures in June 2011—some of which involved weeks-long occupations.



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The Arab Spring in particular was a key inspiration for Occupy. “It made a lot of us feel, ‘Oh, this is possible! Just seeing those regimes topple by pretty much nonviolence, seeing that moment when people weren’t afraid anymore,” Sonny Singh, whose parents are South Asian immigrants, recalled. And 27-year-old Sandy Nurse told us, “Following Egypt,

Algeria, Tunisia and then seeing how it was spreading very quickly gave a real feeling that something was changing.” Similarly, Iranian-American Nastaran Mohit, 30, recounted, “I was watching what was happening in Egypt every single day. I was watching what was happening in Greece, in Spain, where people were at a tipping point. They just couldn’t take this anymore.... I just didn’t imagine that it could happen here.” Others were inspired by events closer to home. “Madison was really significant for showing that an uprising could happen on U.S. soil,” North Dakotan-born Mary Clinton, 25, told us. Thus Occupy was building self-consciously on the wave of a surge of worldwide and domestic protest in 2011. “It was just this sense, like something is in the air,” Nathan Schneider, 27, recalled. “Even Al Gore was saying, ‘It’s time for an American Spring.’”

Occupy Wall Street, in short, was not a spontaneous eruption but rather an action carefully planned by committed activists for whom the Adbusters call represented only the latest in a series of efforts to focus public attention on the injustices associated with the global economic crisis and the staggering growth of inequality in the 21st century. What would set Occupy apart from earlier such efforts was its spectacular success in attracting media attention and its ability to gain traction with the broader public, as we discuss below.

ACTIVISTS AND SUPPORTERS: A PROFILE

During the fall of 2011, Occupy activists and supporters participated in a wide range of activities. There were daily marches from Zuccotti Park to Wall Street; GA meetings twice a day in the park; meetings of working groups organizing outreach, direct action, kitchen, security, and dozens of others; and the production of all kinds of media and spectacle. After Zuccotti Park was cleared, many of these activities continued, with meetings at 60 Wall Street and other locations around the city.

Respondents to our May 1 survey were asked whether or not they had participated in a series of specific OWS activities over the previous months. Table 1 summarizes their answers. (The total sums to over 100 percent because most respondents participated in multiple activities.) In this report, we refer to respondents who indicated that they had participated in at least six activities (from the list in Table 1 or another specific activity not included in the

list) as “actively involved.” This group makes up more than half (56 percent) of the 729 survey respondents.

The data reveal a degree of differentiation by age. Not only were respondents under 30 overrepresented among the most “actively involved” respondents, but they were also more likely to have lived in an Occupy camp, to have posted about OWS on social media, and to have been arrested for Occupy activity. Respondents age 30 and older, on the other hand, were more likely to have visited Zuccotti Park, and more likely to have donated money, food or goods to a camp.

We also asked respondents about their main sources of information about the Occupy movement. Over a third (35 percent) reported that they relied primarily on the Internet for this purpose, followed in importance by getting information through friends (24 percent). Ranking third was information from social media like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (14 percent). Relatively few respondents depended

Table 1. Respondents' Participation in Selected Occupy Wall Street Activities, May 2012.

Activity	Percent
Visited the Occupy camp at Zuccotti Park	82.2%
Marched in an Occupy protest (prior to May 1, 2012)	82.1%
Posted about Occupy via Facebook, Twitter or other social media	66.3%
Attended a General Assembly meeting	64.4%
Monitored Occupy meetings or events on-line via Livestream or Ustream	60.5%
Donated money, food, or goods to an Occupy camp	58.1%
Participated in some other type of direct action related to Occupy	48.8%
Visited another Occupy camp (other than Zuccotti Park)	44.9%
Participated in an Occupy working group	33.7%
Lived in an Occupy camp	10.3%
Arrested for Occupy-related activities	8.2%

N=729

Note: Total adds to more than 100% because respondents could give more than one answer.

Source: Authors' survey.

on mainstream media as a source of information: only 11 percent reported that radio or TV was their main source and even fewer (8 percent) cited newspapers and magazines. There were no statistically significant age differences in regard to information sources, but as one might expect, respondents who were actively involved in OWS were more likely to rely on social media (see Castells 2012) and on friends, while those least active in OWS were more likely to rely on newspapers and magazines.

The group that planned Occupy included many experienced activists, as well as some political neophytes eager to respond to the Adbusters' call. This early phase of the movement brought together distinct networks of activists who had not worked together in the past, reflecting the centrality of social media to the process. As Manuel Castells puts it, Occupy "was born on the Internet, diffused by the Internet" (2012: 168). Many of those who attended the GAs that convened in early August to plan the September 17 occupation recalled that they were surprised to see very few familiar faces at the meetings. "When I showed up on August 2, I didn't know anyone there, and none of my friends came to any of the subsequent general assemblies," 25-year old Matt Presto remembered. Marina Sitrin, 41, who had worked in the Direct Action Network and many other NYC groups, told us, "I went with a friend of mine and I remember saying to him, 'There's probably a lot of people here that I know from ten or fifteen years ago, and I might not remember some of their names and I apologize if I can't introduce you properly.' Then I got to the park, and I didn't know anyone!"

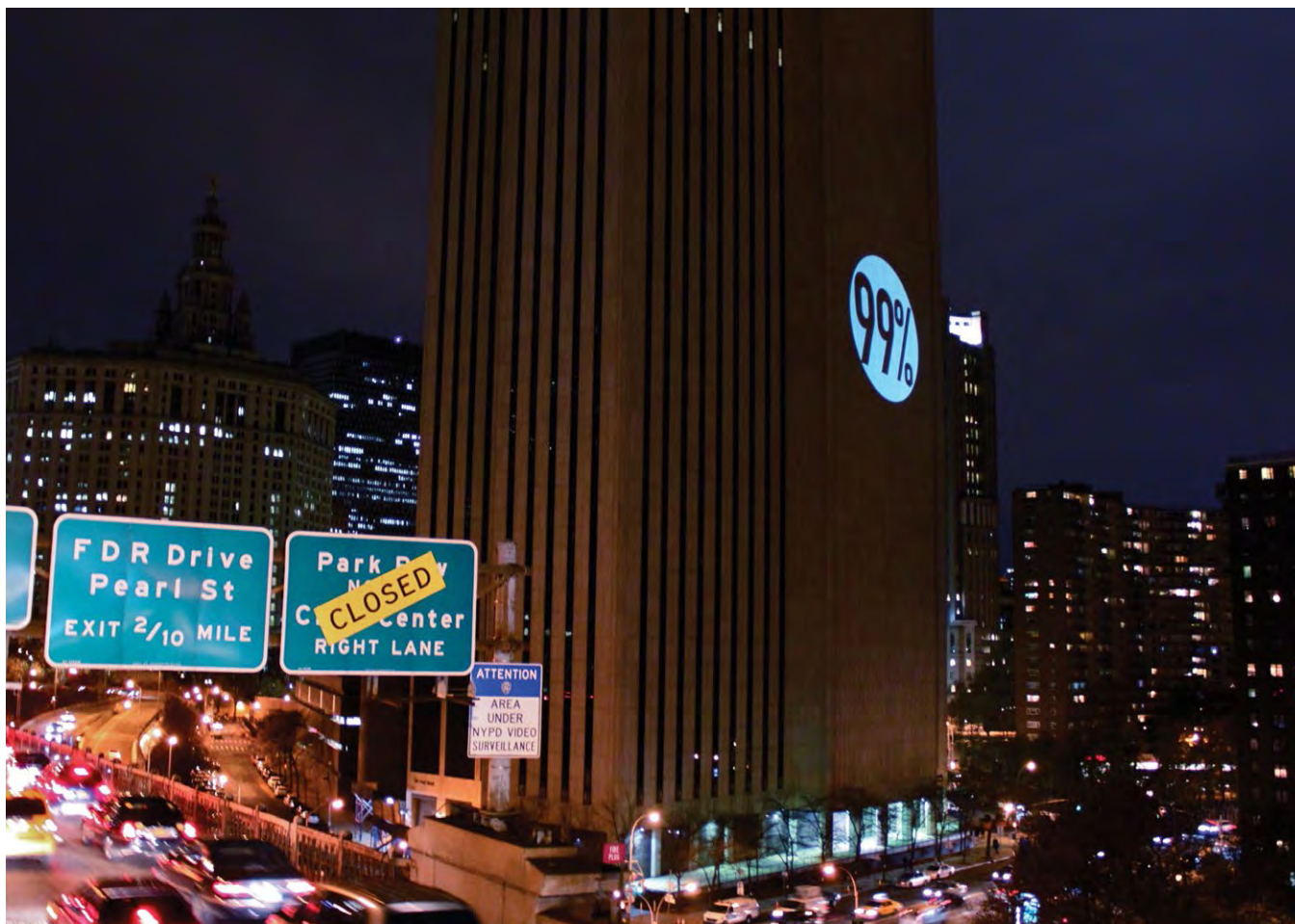
This sense of surprise at finding so many new faces continued as the occupation itself got underway. As Arun Gupta, 46, a journalist and long-time activist, recalled his experience on September 17. "It felt different. I didn't see that many people I knew. That was exciting to me. People came from across the country and some were unable to say precisely why they came except they felt drawn there

by a greater force. It was like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind!*" And Sonny Singh, 32, told us, "I've been doing activism in New York City for a long time now, but I hardly recognized anybody there, which was really interesting to me, and kind of exciting."

"Occupy was kind of a mess, but it was a very exciting mess. It was this group of mostly young people who were full of energy and brilliant and kind of crazy and willing to put themselves in the way," independent journalist and activist Nathan Schneider remarked in an interview. "A lot of them had been involved in the Bloombergville occupation, so they had some experience with occupation. But everyone came with different experience. There were a lot of artists around who were kind of gonzo and willing to dream up weird ideas and then pull them off."

Two distinct age groups were visible at the summer 2011 GAs. The largest group was comprised of Millennials, the generation that came of age around the turn of the 21st century. "It was the 26 to 29 or 30 crowd that was the strongest in terms of presence—people my age, who maybe had grad school or weren't finding jobs, and had just blazed through college and a Master's program and then were like, 'What the hell is this?'" Sandy Nurse told us. But there was also an older group at these planning meetings, comprised of seasoned veterans of earlier social movements, who often acted as informal mentors. "There were a few older people and though there weren't very many of them, they were listened to, welcomed and respected," Nathan Schneider noted.

Across both age groups, nearly all of those involved in the planning phase of OWS were college-educated; they were also disproportionately white and male. The core organizers were "more privileged and more college-educated, and sometimes beyond college-educated," Sonny Singh, who joined OWS after the occupation began and who helped found the People of Color Caucus, pointed out. "Some were fresh out of college, and some, like me, not



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fresh out of college, stale out of college.” The initial participants were “a predominantly young white male group,” recalled Lisa Fithian, a 50-year-old veteran activist who conducted training sessions in the course of the planning.

As can be seen in Figure 1, our survey data also show that participants in the May 1 march and rally were disproportionately highly educated, young and white, with higher than average household incomes. Almost a fourth of our respondents (24 percent) were students, 44 percent of whom were in college and 41 percent in graduate school. Among respondents who had already completed their education, 76 percent had a four-year degree, and more than half of them (39 percent of the total) had post-graduate degrees. This is a much higher level of education than among

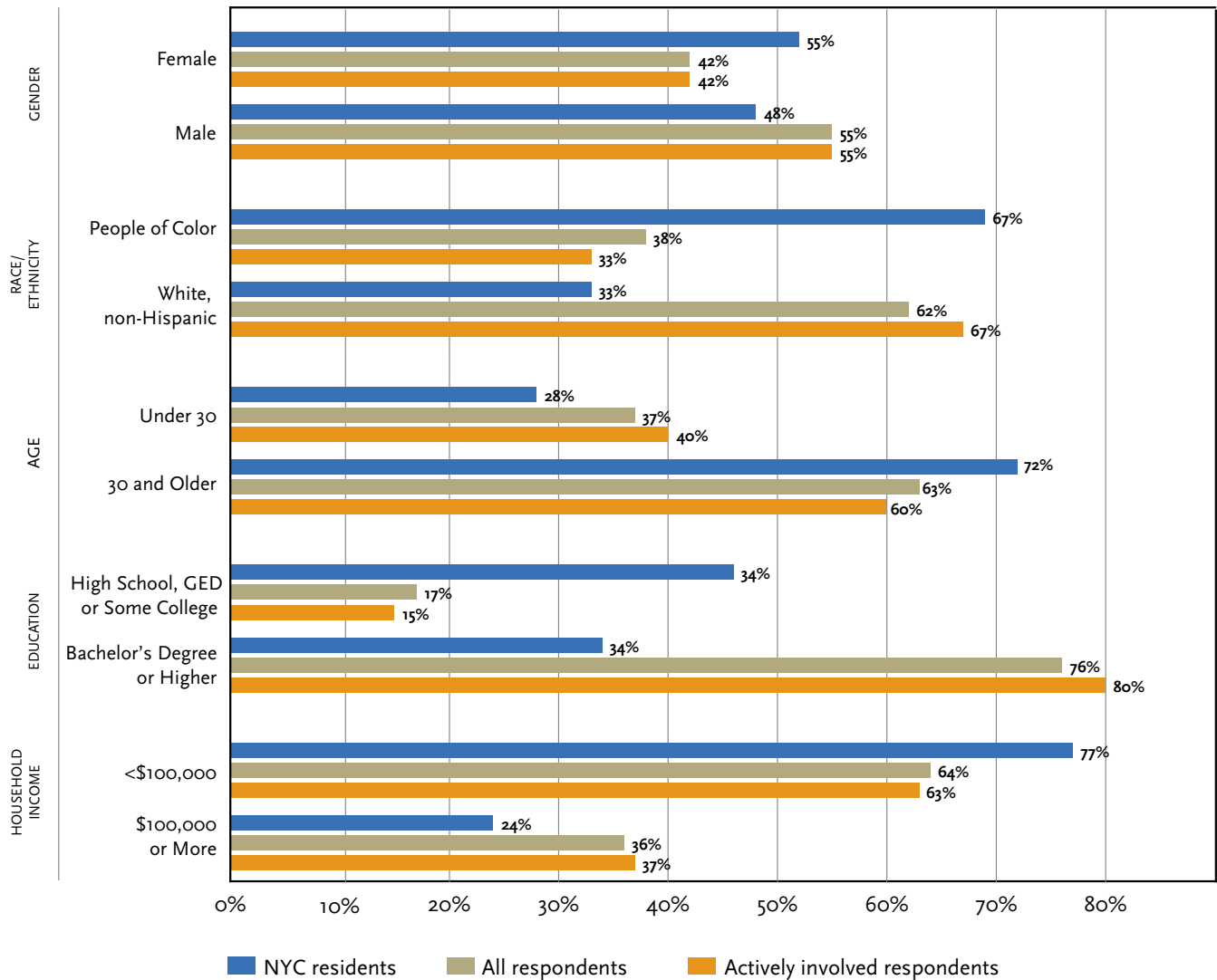
New York City residents generally, only 34 percent of whom have completed college (among those age 25 or older).⁸ (For further comparisons of our sample and New York City residents, see Appendix C.)

Moreover, many respondents had attended or were currently students at elite colleges and universities: among those with a four-year degree, 28 percent had attended top-ranked colleges for their undergraduate degrees; among those currently in college or graduate school, 19 percent were enrolled in top-ranked colleges or universities.⁹

⁸ All the demographic data for New York City residents cited in this section are from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, 2011 data, downloaded from <http://www.census.gov/acs/>

⁹ By “top-ranked” we mean the top 50-ranked national colleges and the top 25 ranked liberal arts colleges, according to the ratings by U.S. News and World Report. See <http://www.usnews.com/rankings>.

Figure 1: Selected Demographic Characteristics of New York City Residents, All Respondents, and Actively Involved Respondents, 2011-12.



Source: Authors' 2012 survey; American Community Survey (annual data for 2011).

As Figure 1 shows, there are other striking differences between survey respondents and the New York City population. Young adults were overrepresented among respondents: 37 percent were under 30 years old, compared to only 28 percent of New York City residents. The respondents who were “actively involved” in OWS were disproportionately youthful: 60 percent of those under 30 were actively involved,

compared to 54 percent of those aged 30 and older, a statistically significant difference.¹⁰

People of color were underrepresented: Non-Hispanic whites made up 62 percent of all respondents, and 67 percent of those who were

¹⁰ All tests of significance in this report, unless otherwise indicated, rely on Pearson chi-square tests. We report data that is significant at $p < .10$. We did not run tests of significance when sample sizes were less than 30.



http://articles.businessinsider.com/2011-10-18/strategy/30292579_1_sign-project-yard-signs-pdf/files

“actively involved” in OWS, but only 33 percent of New York City residents. Immigrants were underrepresented as well: 80 percent of all respondents, and 84 percent of those “actively involved” were U.S.-born, compared to only 63 percent of New York City residents.¹¹ White respondents were also significantly more likely to be “actively involved” than people of color (the figures were 60 and 48 percent, respectively).

In addition, 55 percent of the survey respondents were male, whereas a slight majority (52 percent) of New York City residents are female. Given the high levels of education and the racial and gender composition of survey respondents, it is not surprising that they were also relatively affluent: 36 percent reported household incomes of \$100,000 or more; whereas

only 24 percent of New York City residents had household incomes that high in 2011.

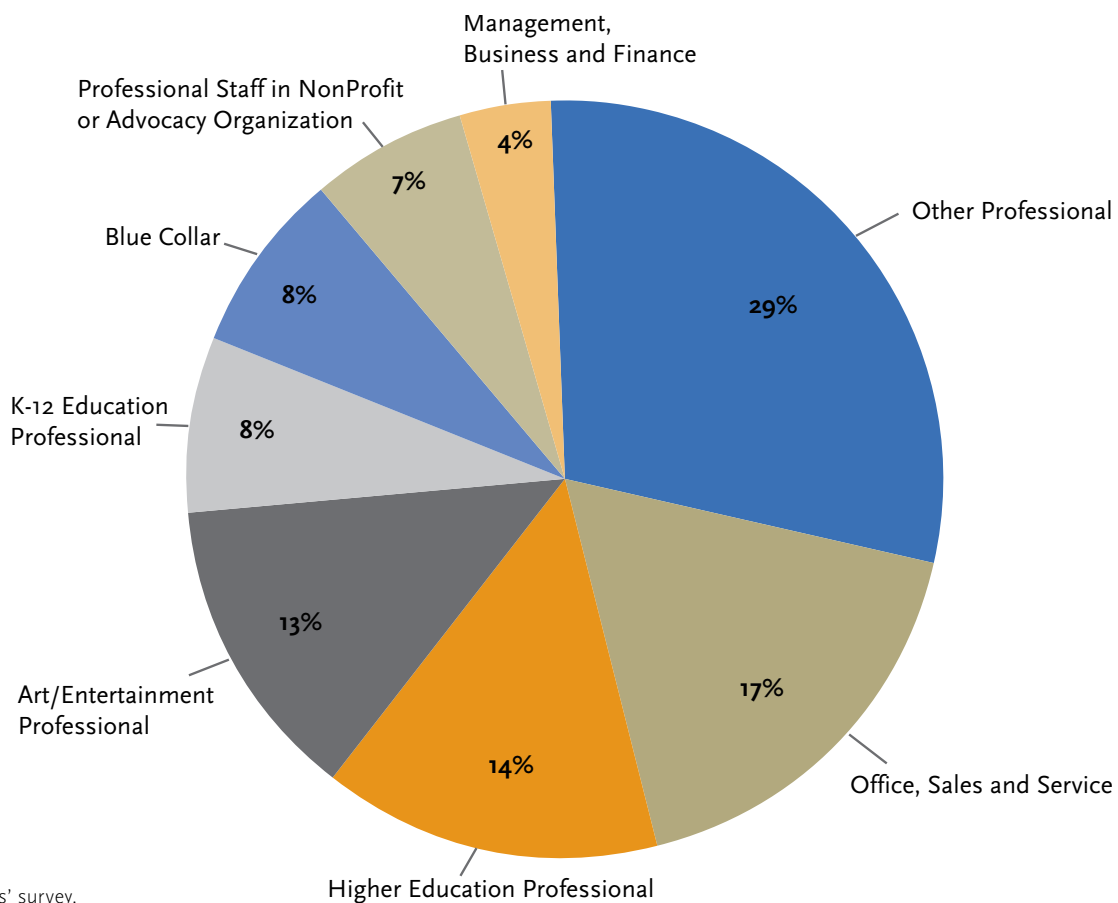
As OWS grew, by all accounts it became increasingly diverse, although its diversity never approached that of the city as a whole. Sandy Nurse recalled that in the beginning “there were lots of men, and it was very white, also, but that started to change very quickly.” Michele Crentsil, a 23-year-old African-American, remarked, “When people are saying, ‘Occupy Wall Street is a white middle class thing,’ I can’t really fight them, because it’s not true, but then it’s not necessarily false either.”

Almost 10 percent of survey respondents were unemployed by the official definition of that term (not employed and actively looking for work).¹²

¹¹ However, the survey was conducted only in English and Spanish, and 16 people were approached but not interviewed because they did not speak either of these languages.

¹² Unemployment among our sample was comparable to of New York City, where the official unemployment rate in May 2012 was also 9.6 percent. The comparable figure—excluding retirees and full-time students—for our respondents is 9.7 percent for all respondents and 9.6 percent for those respondents who were New York City residents.

Figure 2. Occupation of Employed Respondents, 2012.



Source: Authors' survey.

Six percent of all respondents were retired, and 4 percent were full-time students. The rest were employed, and as Figure 2 shows, a majority (71 percent) had professional occupations of some sort, as one might expect given their high levels of educational attainment. Many were educational professionals, including a sizable group of higher education professionals (14 percent of all employed respondents), as Figure 2 shows. As Appendix C shows, respondents were far more likely than New York City residents to be employed in education, arts and entertainment, and other professional occupations; conversely, respondents were far less likely than New York City residents to be employed in office, sales, and service jobs; or in management, business and financial occupations.

Despite their relative affluence and their overrepresentation in the professions, many of our respondents had substantial debt or had experienced recent job loss, as Table 2 shows. More than half of respondents under 30 were carrying over \$1,000 in student debt, and over a third of those in this age group had been laid off or lost a job in the five years prior to the survey; in both cases the age difference was statistically significant. Older respondents were significantly more likely to have credit card debt, while eviction rates were significantly higher among younger respondents. These experiences gave many respondents a personal connection to the issues Occupy raised.

In addition, despite the fact that they were over-represented in professional occupations, among

Table 2. Respondents' Experience of Debt and Economic Hardship, by Age, 2012.

	All Respondents	Age under 30	Age 30 or older
Are you carrying:			
Student loans over \$1,000?	37.3%	53.8%**	28.0%**
Medical debt over \$1,000?	12.1%	11.8%	12.0%
Credit card debt over \$1,000?	28.9%	19.4%**	34.9%**
In the last 5 years, have you experienced:			
Foreclosure on a home?	2.9%	4.9%	1.8%
Evicted from an apartment?	6.8%	9.2%**	5.4%**
Been laid off or lost a job?	29.4%	36.6%**	25.7%**

** P < .05 * P < .10

N=719

Source: Authors' survey.

respondents who were employed (excluding students and retirees) almost one in four (24 percent) reported working less than 35 hours a week. The figure was even higher for those under 30 years old, 29 percent of whom indicated that they worked less than 35 hours a week. And among respondents who were “actively involved,” 33 percent worked less than 35 hours a week. This suggests that precarious employment was a common experience among our respondents, giving many of them another personal connection to the economic crisis that helped spur the Occupy movement.

Indeed, many OWS activists were prototypes of what social movements scholars call “biographical availability” (McAdam 1986), having sufficient time and energy to become activists because they were unconstrained by highly demanding family or work commitments. Alongside the employed OWS supporters whose hours of work were relatively limited were many students and retirees. Most students had jobs as well, but nearly two-thirds of them (64 percent) worked less than 35 hours a week.

Our respondents' experience of underemployment and biographical availability reflects the broader pattern of underemployment—rather than outright unemployment—among highly educated Millennials

in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Youth unemployment was high in September 2011 (14.6 percent among all 20-24 year olds), but it was far lower among the college-educated. For those with a bachelor's degree or more (25 years and older), unemployment was 4.2 percent, and for those with some college, 8.4 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). But members of the Millennial generation were highly likely to be underemployed in the fall of 2011, and like those in our sample, many also were carrying substantial amounts of student debt.

Judson Memorial Church's Rev. Michael Ellick, 38, noted, “You have generations of people graduating from high school and college who are in debt for careers that don't exist anymore, were educated into a world that doesn't exist anymore.” His impression is supported by recent research. A Pew Research Center survey of 18-34 year olds conducted in late 2011 found that 49 percent of respondents had taken a job they didn't want “to pay the bills”; only 30 percent considered their current job a “career” (Pew Research Center 2012). Similarly, in a survey of 2006-11 college graduates, 60 percent of employed respondents reported that their job did not require a 4-year degree, 40 percent said their job was unrelated to their college major, and 24 percent were earning “a lot less” than

they had expected (Stone et al. 2012). Two-thirds of all U.S. students who earned a bachelor's degree in 2011 had borrowed money to help pay for their education, and student loan debt in 2011 averaged \$26,600—compared to \$18,650 in 2004 (Project on Student Debt 2012).

As other commentators have noted, these economic realities help explain OWS' appeal to Millennials. Many participants were “forward-looking people who have been stopped dead in their tracks... their one strongest common feature being a remarkably high level of education,” anthropologist and activist David Graeber, who has been widely credited with helping to invent the slogan “We Are The 99%,” suggested in an early analysis (Graeber 2011). He added that they were “young people bursting with energy, with plenty of time on their hands, every reason to be angry, and access to the entire history of radical thought.”

Many of our interviewees agreed with this characterization. “The people going out to organize, at least at the beginning, were people who had expectations rather than people who’ve already been harmed.... College students in particular, who went to college so they could have a better life, and then finished college with debt and can’t get a job,” Marina Sitrin noted. “A lot of [OWS] people weren’t working, or not working full-time,” veteran labor organizer Stephen Lerner, 54, observed, adding that they were a group “with all sorts of talents and energies, a set of skills that allowed them to explode this out. And



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there's the fearlessness of young people.” Suresh Naidu, a 34-year-old economist and OWS activist noted, “Because of the privilege of a lot of the people involved, they can work on this stuff in time that other working folks don’t have.” Janet Gerson, 64, observed, “People gave up their whole lives to be part of Occupy, and I wasn’t one of the people who could do that.”

POLITICAL EXPERIENCE AND ORIENTATION

One of the most striking aspects of the interviews we conducted was the vast political experience of the core activists themselves. Our survey shows that this was also true of most participants in the May 1, 2012 rally and march. Only 6 percent of survey respondents reported that the May 1 demonstration was the first political protest in which they had participated. Just under 11 percent of all respondents (including those 6 percent) indicated that the first political protest they had been involved in had taken place within the past year.

Almost half (44 percent) of all survey respondents stated that they had been involved in some type of protest activity prior to their 18th birthday; another 38 percent had first done so when they were 18 to 22 years old (most likely as undergraduate students). Many had been part of numerous previous protest marches or rallies: 42 percent of respondents reported that they had participated in 30 or more such events during their lifetimes. Over a fourth (26 percent) had been arrested for their political activities at some point in the past.¹³

Many respondents were also civically engaged to an unusual degree. Almost half (47 percent) responded in the affirmative when asked, “Are you active in any other organization that works on issues that the Occupy movement has raised?” This was especially true of those over 30 years old, 52 percent of whom indicated that they were active in such an organization, compared to only 39 percent of the younger respondents, a statistically significant difference. Organizational affiliations varied widely, and included immigrant rights groups, antiwar organizations, human rights and women’s rights groups, assorted

community organizations, as well as more mainstream political groups.

Nearly a third (32 percent) of respondents who were in the labor force were union members, substantially above the level of union membership among New York City residents, which was 22 percent in 2011-12 (Milkman and Braslow 2012). More than half (53 percent) of all respondents who were union members indicated that their union had encouraged them to attend the May 1 rally and march. Like the other types of civic engagement discussed above, union membership was more common among respondents aged 30 or more, whose 44 percent unionization rate was over three times that of respondents under 30 (13 percent).¹⁴

The disproportionate presence of union members reflects the large number of respondents employed in the highly-unionized education sector; in New York City, the unionization rate in education was 54 percent in 2011-12. Indeed, among respondents who were union members, almost one-fourth (24 percent) were members of the Professional Staff Congress/American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which represents staff and faculty at the City University of New York. Another 26 percent were members of the United Federation of Teachers or other education unions. The next largest group (8 percent) of unionized respondents were members of the health care workers’ union commonly known as “1199,” an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union.

Almost 90 percent of our respondents were born before 1990 and eligible to vote in the United States. Within that group, well over half (57 percent) identified with or leaned toward the Democratic Party, as Table 3

¹³ Although we have no firm evidence on this point, by May 1, 2012, it may be that seasoned activists were more likely than their newly politicized counterparts to turn out for a march called by OWS.

¹⁴ The age difference in unionization reflects the lower unionization rate among young workers generally (see Milkman and Braslow 2012, figure 5). And unlike involvement in civil society organizations like those discussed in the previous paragraph, whether or not someone is a union member is usually determined by the type of job she or he has, rather than the preference of the individual.

Table 3. Political Party Orientation of Respondents Eligible to Vote in the United States, by Age, May 2012.

	All Respondents	Less Active	Actively Involved
Democrat	33.8%	26.3%**	33.8%**
Disillusioned Democrat	8.4%	6.3%	8.4%
Independent, Leans Democrat	15.1%	21.4%**	15.1%**
Republican	0.5%	0.8%	0.5%
Independent, Leans Republican	0.3%	0.4%	0.3%
Independent, Does not lean	7.9%	7.9%	7.9%
Third party/Other Affiliation	13.1%	10.9%	13.1%
Do not identify with any party	20.6%	25.5%**	20.6%**
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

** P < .05 * P < .10

N=656

Source: Authors' survey.

shows.¹⁵ There were almost no Republicans among our respondents, but a large proportion (42 percent) identified as Independents who leaned neither Democrat nor Republican, supported third parties or other political entities, or stated that they did not identify with any political party. Over one-fourth of respondents under 30 said they did not identify with any political party, and another 21 percent either identified with a third party or stated that they were Independents with neither Republican nor Democratic leanings. Although the survey did not inquire directly about socialist or anarchist leanings, 7 percent of all respondents volunteered one of those political identities when asked about their political party affiliation, and another 4 percent volunteered that they identified as Greens.

Occupy has often been compared to the Tea Party in that it is a largely “middle class” and white movement and in that its participants have views outside the political mainstream (albeit at the other end of the left-right spectrum). Like Occupy activists, many grassroots Tea Party leaders have extensive political

experience in community organizations. But the Tea Party is dominated by older whites, including many retired people (who are thus also “biographically available,” at the other end of life), and focuses much of its energy on influencing candidates for elected office, with enormous funding from right-wing advocacy groups (Skocpol and Williamson 2012). As we have seen, Occupy has a much younger profile, its supporters are more highly educated (although many Tea Party members did attend college, contrary to popular belief). Moreover, Occupy has never had a stable source of funding, and for its activists electoral politics is anathema.

Indeed, as Table 3 shows, a large proportion of respondents were deeply skeptical about the mainstream political parties. However, among respondents born before 1990 and eligible to vote in the United States, 90 percent did cast a vote in the 2008 general election. The vast majority of them (86 percent) voted for Obama. Only 1 percent voted for McCain, while 11 percent voted for another presidential candidate (the other 2 percent declined to reveal the candidate for whom they had voted).

National data show that Obama was extremely popular among Millennials in 2008, when 66 percent

¹⁵ We only recorded “Disillusioned Democrat” when a respondent volunteered this information. Since 8.4 percent of respondents did so, however, we later coded it as separate response, as shown in Table 3.

Table 4. Respondents' Obama Campaign Activity Participation in 2008, by Age.

	Age under 30	Age 30 or older
Donating money	45.2**	72.2**
Phone banking	32.3*	39.6*
Knocking on doors	25.8**	42.9**
Working as paid staffer	3.2	4.7
Participating in Camp Obama	4.8	6.6

** P < .05 * P < .10

N=281

Source: Authors' survey.

of voters under age 30 cast their ballots for him, compared to 50 percent of those aged 30 or more. That age disparity was larger than in any U.S. presidential election since exit polling began in 1972. Among our respondents, the percentage of those under 30 who voted for Obama was even higher (89 percent of those who voted in 2008). Nearly as many (85 percent) of respondents 30 and older voted for him, however, and the age difference was not statistically significant.

According to national surveys, many Millennials did more than vote in 2008: 28 percent of voters under age 30 in battleground states attended at least one Obama campaign event, far more than among those aged 30 and up (Pew Research Center 2010). Among our respondents, those under 30 years old also had a high level of participation in the Obama campaign. In addition, regardless of age, a large proportion of respondents donated money to or actively worked on his campaign that year. Forty percent of respondents contributed actively (in time or money) to a presidential campaign in 2008, and within this group 58 percent worked for or donated money to Obama. As Table 4 shows, however, respondents under 30 were less likely to have participated in the 2008 Obama campaign than their older counterparts.

Disenchantment with Obama was a driver of the Occupy movement for many of the young people who participated. "In politics, too, as in education, we are looking at a generation of young people who played by

the rules, and have seen their efforts prove absolutely fruitless," noted David Graeber (2011). He added:

Obama was running, then [2008], as a candidate of "Change," using a campaign language that drew liberally from that of radical social movements... as a former community organizer, he was one of the few candidates in recent memory who could be said to have emerged from a social movement background rather than from smoke-filled rooms. This, combined with the fact that Obama was Black, gave young people a sense that they were experiencing a genuinely transformative moment...

A Democratic president elected on a platform of "Change" coming to power at a moment of economic crisis so profound that radical measures of some sort were unavoidable, and at a time when popular rage against the nation's financial elites was so intense that most Americans would have supported almost anything. If it was not possible to enact any real progressive politics or legislation at such a moment, clearly it would never be. Yet none were enacted. Instead, Wall Street gained even greater control over the political process.

Some of the core activists we interviewed had actively worked on the Obama campaign and were deeply disappointed in what followed. "I did election observation in Philly the day of. Because he [Obama] said everything right," Amin Husain, 36, told us. "And you wanted to believe. I didn't understand

when pundits were saying, ‘He’s playing with fire.’ I do now.” Similarly, Mary Clinton recalled. “I definitely supported Obama and voted for Obama. I’ve done the door knocking and house calls and things like that.” Isham Christie, 26, observed, “The Obama presidency was disillusioning to a lot of people, and that’s why Occupy Wall Street spread so much. We’d tried to get the best liberal we could, and then we got more of the same shit.

Disenchantment with Obama was a driver of the Occupy movement for many of the young people who participated... but many other interviewees did not fit this description, having become disillusioned with mainstream politics long before 2008.

Then it’s either cynicism or we’re going to try something completely different. And people are, like, ‘Let’s try something completely different.’”

But many other interviewees did not fit this description, having become disillusioned with mainstream politics long before 2008. They did not share in the high hopes for the Obama presidency that were so widespread among Millennials generally. This was not only the case for the older activists: Matt Presto, for example, became disillusioned with mainstream politics

after the 2000 election—when he was in 8th grade! This group, however, did witness the excitement and subsequent disappointment in Obama among their peers, and viewed the growth of Occupy in that light.

Phil Arnone, 25, told us:

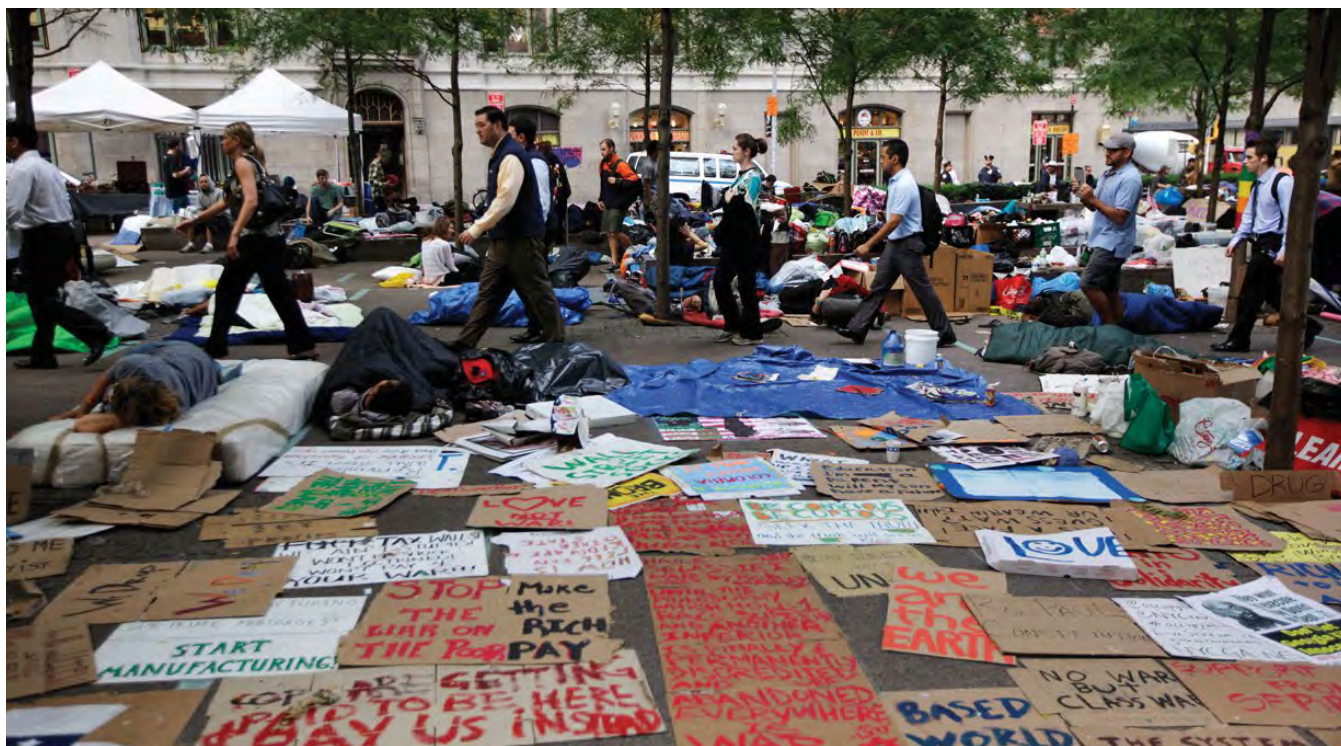
People were coming together because they wanted to see something change in this country, and they wanted to see it move in the same direction.... And then when Obama actually won, I remember there was a huge celebration in the streets, on

Broad Street in Philadelphia. Everyone was out together! The police cleared it out pretty quickly, but it felt for one moment like we had all come together because we wanted to see something really positive happen in the country. And then of course, we got the disappointments we got. A lot of people are starting to realize that getting Obama elected and all the effort that went into it, it didn’t produce. It’s compelling people to say, “We tried that, we’re not going to waste any of our energy or any of our hope again.”

And Michele Crentsil recalled:

I’m Black, both my parents are Black, and I grew up in Kentucky, in the South. So did it mean a lot? Yeah! I have a nephew who will be 10 and a niece who will be 6 and I remember saying to them, “We have our first Black president!” I never thought it would happen. My grandmother just passed away last year, she was 101, born in 1909 in Kentucky, so watching her watch that happen meant a lot. Did I think that he was going to come in and save Black America? No. But I thought it was completely amazing that he managed to actually win the election. I honestly didn’t think he was going to win up until the time he did win.... His being in office actually opened up a space for Occupy Wall Street, because of the disillusionment. People were like, ‘Oh, we’re going to have change!’ And it didn’t happen. So it actually created that space for something like Occupy to exist.

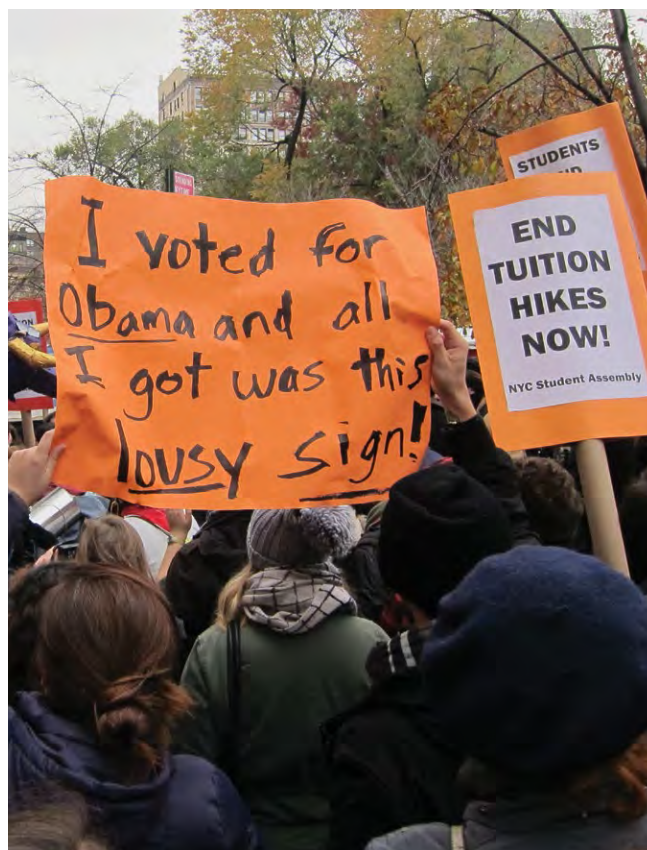
Yotam Marom, a 26-year-old activist whose parents were born in Israel, did not work for Obama himself, but agreed that the 2008 election helped fuel the Occupy movement. “People voted for him because they thought he was what he said he was, which was change. People cried when he got elected. People thought it was a revolutionary moment. Because they earnestly wanted what he presented himself as—which actually is very similar to what we [OWS] actually are.”



<http://occupiedstories.com/baptism-by-rain-fire.html>

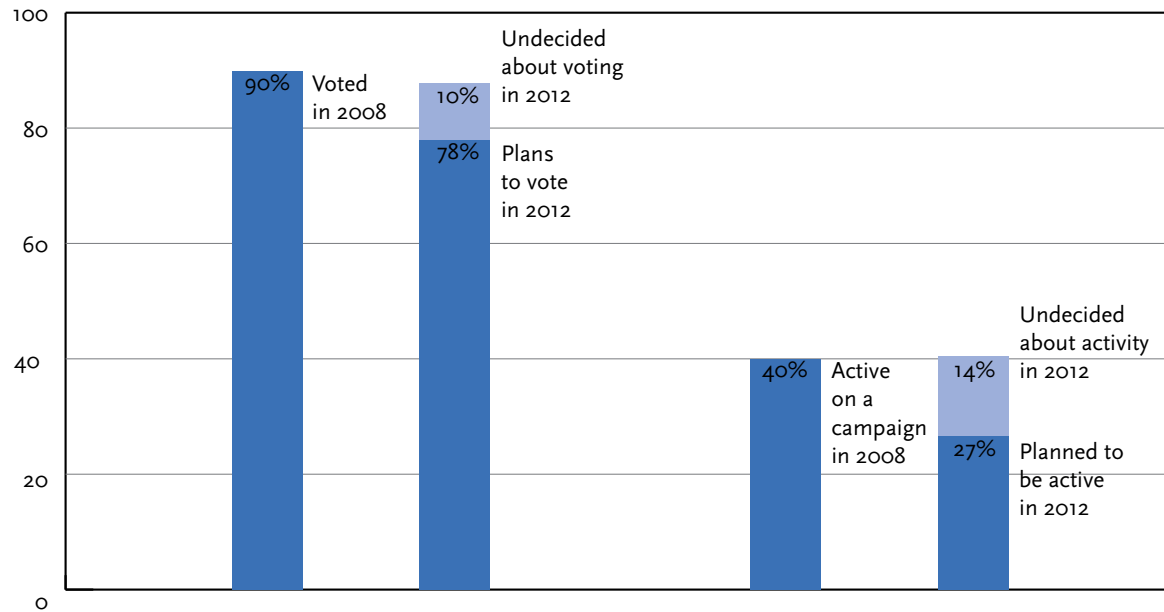
Respondents' views of the 2012 presidential election campaign, as reported in our May 1, 2012 survey, suggest far less enthusiasm for Obama than in 2008. As Figure 3 shows, fewer respondents planned to vote or participate actively in a presidential campaign in 2012 than had done so four years earlier. To be sure, nearly as many respondents seemed likely to vote in the 2012 election as the 90 percent who had voted in 2008: only 12 percent of those eligible indicated that they had decided not to vote in 2012, while another 10 percent were undecided. In regard to campaign activity, similarly, the sum total of those who planned to be active in a 2012 presidential campaign and those who were undecided was about the same as the percentage who had been active in 2008.

Figure 4 shows the dropoff between 2008 and 2012 in voting for Obama by age group. If we presume that many who were undecided on May 1 ultimately did vote for Obama, the dropoff in voting was relatively modest for both age groups. However, there was a substantial dropoff in campaign activity, especially among those under 30 years old.



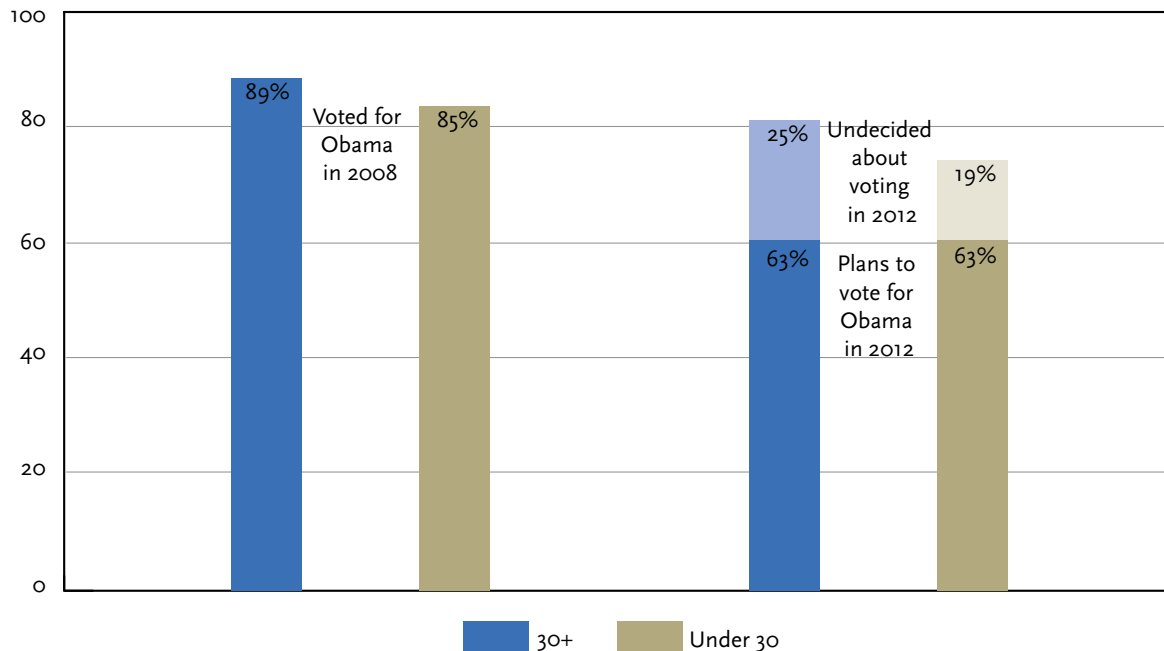
Scott Lynch

Figure 3. Respondents' Voting and Electoral Campaign Activity, 2008 and 2012.



Note: The figures shown for “planned to vote in 2012” include those who indicated they would “probably” vote (along with those who said “yes”).
Source: Authors' survey.

Figure 4. Respondents' Support for Obama, By Age, 2008 and 2012.



Note: The figures shown for “plans to vote for Obama in 2012” include those who indicated they would “probably” vote (along with those who said “yes”).
Source: Authors' survey.

WHY OCCUPY GAINED TRACTION

Most of the core activists we interviewed confessed that they had been skeptical when they first heard about the idea of a Wall Street occupation, and that they were surprised that Occupy attracted so much support from the wider public. Even those who were directly involved in planning the September 17 launch shared the view of Matt Presto, who recalled, “We were all expecting an occupation that would last maybe two days, and then the police would break it up. So we were not prepared for what was to come. We certainly didn’t expect it to expand to other locations, either.”

Isam Christie, similarly, recalled his initial skepticism. “It’s a militarized zone down there. We’re not going to get mass numbers. And someone’s like, ‘I’m here because this is going to be the start of the next major social movement in the United States,’ and I was thinking, ‘That person’s crazy, that doesn’t happen. Delusional.’” Yotam Marom agreed, “I didn’t see any particular reason that this call would have any mass appeal that the other things we had done didn’t have.”

Presto, Christie and Marom are all in their twenties. The older activists we interviewed were even more doubtful about the occupation plan. “I was one that was very cynical about it. I did not believe that issuing the call would lead to a crowd,” 54-year-old Stephen Lerner recalled. Similarly, David Graeber, 51, told us in an interview, “I thought the most likely scenario is that we’d all get beat up and put in jail. The thing that shocked us was how it just took off everywhere. We didn’t expect that.”

Similarly, Rev. Michael Ellick recalled: “I thought, this isn’t going to work, and I told my friends so. I was wrong!” Community organizer Jonathan Smucker, 34, also began with a jaundiced view: “I was very skeptical of it; I think a lot of organizers were.

Adbusters magazine was putting out a call to action for a Tahrir Square moment in the United States in New York’s financial district. That seemed far-fetched to me.” Smucker added that having a lot of political experience was not especially helpful in this situation:

Occupy was a moment that needed somebody to not know what wouldn’t work. Like me, I didn’t think it would work, so I didn’t do it at the beginning. You needed people who didn’t know better. That’s the brilliant thing about social movements and why they tend to be led by young people. They haven’t learned all the things that won’t work, and they get an audacious idea and move forward with it. That’s a beautiful and humbling thing!

Isam Christie also emphasized the audacity of Occupy as a key element in its unexpected success. “There are some things where you know exactly how they’re going to turn out, but this thing had a life of its own,” he told us. “That audacity of trying to go for what’s necessary and making it happen, rather than just working within what’s possible now. That ability to recognize the world-historic changing times that we’re in, which makes us dream a little bit bigger than we would before.”

The fact that the NYPD did not attempt to evict the protesters immediately was another vital precondition for the occupation’s success. “The police surrounded the park the first night and threatened to evict everyone by force. They could have smashed it, but didn’t.” Arun Gupta pointed out. Nathan Schneider witnessed the NYPD

Most of the core activists we interviewed confessed that they had been skeptical when they first heard about the idea of a Wall Street occupation.



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decision not to do so firsthand. “At around 10:30 or 11 that first night, the police were ready to move in on the park. And then a big black Suburban arrived, and I saw a little bald man poke his head out of the window, take a look, and give the order to draw back. They could have moved in, but they decided not to.” A few days later, the police approach abruptly changed. But their confrontational tactics soon backfired: the whole world was watching the pepper-spraying of nonviolent Occupy participants on September 24, and the arrests of 700 peaceful demonstrators on the Brooklyn Bridge on October 1, 2011.

These incidents drew enormous media attention to the Occupy protests, amplifying their appeal, and helped inspire other occupations around the country.¹⁶ Indeed, another ingredient in Occupy’s success was the relative ease with which it could be imitated. “If you were in Boise, Idaho, and you saw what we were doing at Zuccotti, you’d know exactly what to do where

¹⁶ For maps of all the Occupy camps around the U.S. see Castells 2012: 164-65.

you were at,” Isham Christie pointed out. “So it had this short circuit that a lot of political work doesn’t have. That tactical replicability really added to its ability to spread all over.”

OWS famously refused to define its “demands,” a stance that was widely criticized in some circles. But many of our interviewees passionately defended that aspect of OWS and indeed, argued that it was a key ingredient in the movement’s appeal. “It was a wise decision for us to not really address this question about what our demand is. People can make of it what they want,” Matt Presto commented. Arun Gupta agreed: “The chains of equivalence: anyone could come into the movement and see their grievance as equivalent to everyone else. If it’s like, I don’t have a job, I have student debt, I have huge medical bills, I’m thrown out of my house, the hydrofracking that’s going on, the BP oil spill, it doesn’t matter. Everyone felt it’s Wall Street, it’s the 1% that’s to blame. Because they have all the economic power, they all have all the political power.”¹⁷

Similarly, Jonathan Smucker pointed out that OWS was a “floating signifier that everybody saw different things in...” And Rev. Michael Ellick asserted that the absence of formal demands was a brilliant—and deliberate—strategic move: “There were very smart, strategic reasons why there were no asks. Not everyone knew that, but the strategists were thinking this way,” he told us. “It allowed there not to be one issue. As soon as there’s one issue, then I alienate the two of you who don’t have my issue. But with this hashtag, t-shirt, icon style of organizing, everyone showed up. And we could project onto Occupy whatever our issues were.”

The survey data suggest that a broad array of specific concerns motivated OWS participants’ support for the movement. Table 5 summarizes the issues they cited when asked (in an open-ended question) to identify “the main issues that lead you

¹⁷ This is an allusion to Laclau and Mouffe 2001, who introduced the idea of “chains of equivalence.”

Table 5. Issues That Led Respondents to Support OWS, by Extent of Involvement, 2012.

Issue	All Respondents	Less Active	Actively Involved
Inequality/the 1%	47.5%	50.0%	45.4%
Money in politics/Frustration with D.C.	25.5%	20.7%**	29.4%**
Corporate Greed	18.5%	18.2%	18.8%
Student Debt/Access to education	17.4%	15.4%	19.0%
Unions/labor rights issues	13.0%	15.7%*	10.9%*
Health Care	12.4%	12.4%	12.4%
Jobs, unemployment	11.9%	14.5%*	9.9%*
Antiwar, environment, women's rights issues	11.4%	9.0%*	13.3%*
Solidarity with Occupy-like movements	11.0%	9.9%	11.9%
Immigrant Rights	10.4%	14.8%**	6.9%**
Capitalism as a system	9.2%	4.3%**	13.1%**
Civil liberties issues	8.2%	6.8%	9.4%
Racism/race related issues	7.1%	7.4%	5.4%
Housing/Foreclosures	6.5%	7.7%	5.4%

** $P < .05$ * $P < .10$

N=727

Note: Total adds to more than 100% because respondents could give more than one answer. "Less Active" respondents participated in fewer than 6 of the activities shown in Table 1; "Actively Involved" respondents participated in 6 or more activities.

Source: Authors' survey.

to support Occupy." The issue most often mentioned was Occupy's trademark, namely inequality and "the 1%," which nearly half of our respondents cited as a motivating concern. Ranked next were "money in politics" and "corporate greed," followed by student debt and access to education. Taken together, these issues suggest the salience of Occupy's class analysis for the movement's participants and supporters.

As Table 5 also shows, "actively involved" respondents were especially concerned about "money in politics," issues involving capitalism as a system, and "new social movement" issues such as war, the environment, and women's rights.¹⁸ On the other hand, those less active in OWS were significantly more concerned about labor issues and unemployment,

as well as immigrant rights. This may reflect the fact that labor unions and immigrant rights groups co-sponsored the May 1 march and rally.¹⁹

There were some age differences: respondents under age 30, as one would expect, were significantly more concerned about student debt and access to education than older respondents. Those aged 30 and older, on the other hand, were significantly more concerned about inequality and corporate greed.

But what is perhaps most striking in Table 5 is the wide range of concerns that converged within Occupy. In the inclusive framework of the "99%," and in the absence of a formal list of OWS demands, as Sandy Nurse observed, it was easy for people to participate: "College students, people who were a little bit older,

¹⁸ The term "new social movements" is used in the sociological literature to denote a variety of movements that were prominent in the 1960s and 1970s in many countries in the global North, in contrast to labor unions and progressive political parties (the "old social movements").

¹⁹ Respondents who were union members were significantly underrepresented in the "actively involved" group of respondents: only 49 percent of them were "actively involved," compared to 59 percent of respondents who were not union members.

who'd lost homes, who really didn't know why they were upset. They didn't know all the stats, they didn't know all the details, but they just knew that it wasn't working, and they felt like they found something with people who were also pissed, and they didn't know why, but they just wanted to be there on the street, being a visual dissenting voice."

Interviewees argued that the absence of specific "demands" from the movement's agenda was crucial to its broad appeal.

Michael Ellick made a similar observation: "Occupy's approach was not to organize by policy but to organize by spectacle, and by archetype, and by emotion and idea, and to find a different way of speaking to people. It hit a nerve." Amin Husain took this reasoning further, asserting, "This movement is post-identity. It opens space for a co-existence of various critiques, whether it is the military-industrial complex, or the Man, or the system or patriarchy, or racism, or all of the above. It isn't about having good ideas, it's about freeing up people's imaginations. A beautiful thing about Occupy is that it said, 'We're not going to deal with "isms.'" We don't know what those mean. We're interested in how we live and how we relate to one another.'" The notion that OWS would not deal with "isms" was not without controversy, as many participants felt that OWS had to address issues of race, gender, and other systems of oppression, both in society and within the movement itself, a topic to which we will return.

Several of our interviewees argued that the absence of specific "demands" from the movement's agenda invited a more broad, systemic critique. As Stephen Lerner commented:

They dealt with the biggest demand, that the whole thing's broken. That's what was powerful. There was total clarity on who the bad guys were. The fact that it was Occupy Wall Street, in Wall

Street, versus Occupy the Post Office or Occupy the Senate, was critical. That's what made it different. They captured what everybody knows on some kind of subconscious level about who's really running the country and who's in charge. What excited them was that somebody was standing up and being furious, and that was the kind of thing you heard people say, "Finally somebody saying we're going to take a stand!"

Other interviewees agreed that making Wall Street the symbolic target of the movement was another important element in its success in gaining traction with the public. "It had a wide, national appeal," 40-year-old union organizer Rob Murray observed. "It's a national target, it's Wall Street! That affects the entire country and the entire world." Jonathan Smucker agreed: "People are mad at the banks and Wall Street, so the initial Occupiers named the right target, a symbol that people resonated with. I think a lot of people, despite negative stereotypes about protest and protestors, were glad somebody was standing up to Wall Street and the banks." Phil Arnone added, "People appreciated the gutsiness of going out and stating that the emperor has no clothes. People really appreciated finally having something expressing the heartfelt discontent they had for the way things were. We'd been picking the lesser of two evils for so long, it's almost like we forgot what it was like to actually have a choice!"

Still another feature of Occupy that helped it attract widespread support was the tactic of occupation itself, and the fact that it maintained a continual presence in Zuccotti Park, in close proximity to Wall Street. "That it wasn't a one-day thing was hugely important," Stephen Lerner pointed out. "And having the central place that everybody could come to." Phil Arnone elaborated on this point: "It was really nice to have the 24-hour living spectacle, so no matter what time of day it was, what the weather was like, whatever, you can just go, and the movement is there, and you're plugged into it. With any other kind of demonstration,



Seann Patrick Cram

if it's for an hour, a day, whatever, by the time you've heard about it your chance to go down and check it out is gone. But this was living and continuous. It was intoxicating, and I think people could just feel the difference. It just felt like different air!"

Other interviewees also commented on the importance of the physical space in Occupy's success. "What was unique was the specific tactic, having outside space do something," Michael Ellick said. "It hacked the media system." And Sonny Singh remarked, "It was like a magnet. People just came

there without even knowing what they were going to do there. They just wanted to be there, and hang out and have conversations with people. It was such a beautiful thing. And all these people dedicating so much of their work to the logistics and to making it all work was also really powerful." Isham Christie agreed: "We had libidinal connections to that space, people felt identified with that space, because we transformed it. There were all these organizers who were just there all the time. You could go there and find people and figure out what's going on and get plugged in." Janet Gerson also commented on the emotional aspect of the space. "The sun was shining, the leaves were glowing with yellow, the helicopters were above, the police cameras were there, and the television broadcasting to the world was there. Oh, collective power!"

Nathan Schneider remembered "the excitement of being wrapped up in this community and constantly seeing other people and networking and having conversations, making connections, developing projects on the fly. You'd go there and get sucked in, and couldn't leave for hours, and all you had done was have conversations. That is such powerful fodder for organizing." Shen Tong, a Chinese-born activist agreed: "There's a lot of energy, which is very important for the movement, or people won't throw their body into it or leave their young family and work 16 hours in addition to their job. The easy access to the park, the magic in the air that you step into, a near-religious experience, that the moment you decide you're part of this, you are."

Arun Gupta expressed the same sentiment even more lyrically:

To decide to do an occupation immediately means that you need to recreate the means of daily reproduction. You need food, shelter, bedding, healthcare. Then other aspects of society arise as well. You have education, the library, psychological counseling, arts and culture. It then becomes theater. All protest is theater, the left had just



<http://www.classwarfareexists.com/words-as-visuals-dear-capitalism/>

gotten used to bad theater. And the Occupations were wonderful theater. It felt like an actual organic entity. You'd see all these people milling about, all these exchanges. People getting a hot meal, blankets and a tent, books, singing and drumming together, people picking each other up.... And none of it is mediated by money. It's a non-commodified space in the heart of global capital, in the ventricle! It's like you're inhaling this clean mountain air because people could relate to each other in public space but outside the market. That's why people were so drawn and so attracted to it. We don't need the corporations. We don't need the political class. We don't need the expertocracy. We don't need the pundits. We don't need the police state. It was a rejection of all that. It had that immersive

character to it, that you were creating something beautiful and almost magical. How do you capture lightning in a bottle? For the first time in decades the Left was reaching people through the gut! First-time activists did not have to come to the movement having read hundreds of books on social cultural theory, attended weeks of grueling anti-oppression workshops, and learning to pepper their comments with academic jargon. It's also rejection of liberals and unions, consultants, focus groups, polling. It's not the same old tired rallies, preprinted protest signs, and canned chants. It was unpredictable and that's what made it so powerful. The ways it's unpredictable will make your eyes light up and make you cringe at the same time. Or you'll feel chills!

PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS AND DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Not only did many OWS activists reject mainstream U.S. political parties as hopelessly corrupted by corporate power, but they also spurned traditional left-wing organizations as overly hierarchical. More influenced by anarchism and autonomism than socialism or left libertarianism, their political worldviews combined elements of all these traditions, united by a tactical commitment to direct action. OWS' tactical repertoire centered on nonviolent civil disobedience, and the occupation itself embodied the prefigurative prescription, "Be the change you wish to see in the world" often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi.²⁰ That precept not only informed the way in which daily life was organized in Zuccotti Park, but also Occupy's practice of consensus-based decision-making processes and "deliberative democracy" (Polletta 2004, Klein 2011).

The movement was about "not asking for permission," Mary Clinton explained, adding: "The whole point of having a protest is to slow things down and disrupt so that you can get your message across. So sticking to civil disobedience has been a real strength." This was the logic underlying OWS' direct action approach. As Matt Presto elaborated, "I consider occupation a form of direct action, and I consider direct action to be far more effective than traditional marches in the streets," he told us. "I consider direct action to be any kind of action that does not recognize the legitimacy of existing political structures, simply taking matters into our own hands. Instead of, for example, applying for a permit to convene in a space, we just take it."

Around the country, some Occupy activists revisited the debate about "diversity of tactics" common in left-anarchist circles (most recently in the anti-corporate globalization movement) The debate revolved around what tactics are strategic for the

movement, centered on (often contested) definitions of "violence" and "nonviolence." (Starr 2006, Schneider 2011, Hedges 2012, Graeber 2012). Some argued that property destruction was nonviolent and should not be excluded from the movement's tactical repertoire, a view that many Occupy activists accepted.

However, such discussion remained abstract in the New York context, because in practice New York City's Occupy movement consistently avoided both property destruction and any forms of violent resistance.

"Early on, we decided that it was in our best interest strategically to take this very strict position in terms of Gandhian nonviolence," Marisa Holmes recalled. "It was a strategic decision." David Graeber echoed the same point: "We decided early on that we were going to have to be completely nonviolent," he told us.

"New York is the most policed public space on earth, especially Wall Street. I suppose certain points on the West Bank might be more so. And Zuccotti Park was just two blocks away from ground zero. I think we all took it pretty much for granted we'd have no choice but to take a Gandhian approach."

Lisa Fithian, who had extensive previous experience with direct action tactics, and who trained many OWS activists in nonviolent civil disobedience, told us, "New York has been working with a nonviolent framework. There's people that don't want that but understand at one level that it's important. So there's been some good discipline there." Stephen Lerner commented, "The nonviolence is really important. Obviously there would not have been sympathy for the folks who got pepper sprayed and kettled, if right before they had thrown Molotov cocktails at people. I generally am a supporter of nonviolence, tactically, philosophically and practically; I disagree with those who simultaneously argue and believe that we have the most powerful oppressive state in the history of humankind and that an effective way to challenge this oppressive state is to throw rocks at well-armed police."

²⁰ Although this statement is widely associated with Gandhi, there is no documentation that he ever wrote or uttered these words. See Morton 2011.

Many shared Matt Presto's view that the debate around violence was "a distraction" from a more broad and open-ended conversation about movement action. He told us, "I don't think smashing windows is particularly effective. I don't think that letter-writing is effective either, but I don't condemn those who write letters. As I once said in a meeting on this, it seems we're only assessing efficacy when it comes to property destruction, but we should be discussing efficacy across the board for all types of tactics."

Along with its dedication to nonviolent civil disobedience, the other key aspect of Occupy was its prefigurative politics, which shaped both the ways in which decisions were made and the organization of daily life in Zuccotti Park.²¹ From the outset OWS adopted a decision-making process based on consensus and a self-consciously non-hierarchical structure. These were carried over from earlier waves of activism, particularly the anti-corporate globalization protests in 1999-2001, and predecessor organizations like the revival of Students for a Democratic Society in the early 2000s. Many OWS activists also drew inspiration from recent Latin American social movements, from the Zapatistas to the factory occupations in Argentina and Venezuela (Sitrin 2012).

Occupy GAs featured what Jonathan Smucker called the "brilliant collective ritual" of the "people's mic," in which the group amplified a speaker by repeating his or her words. In larger groups, such amplification would pass through two, three, four or more circles of people radiating out from the original speaker. Outside the GAs—in the park, in rallies, and on marches, anyone could call out "mic check" and create a vehicle for sharing information.²² This was deeply empowering, as Smucker observed, "It makes

people feel heard, like they're part of a movement. It's really expressive."²³

GAs used a form of modified consensus to make decisions, a process designed to facilitate discussion with the goal of reaching agreement among as many participants as practical. Experienced facilitators, or new activists trained by the Facilitation Working Group, kept "stack" during the discussions, with a first-come first-served list of everyone who wanted to speak. The aim was to air all sides of a question, allowing the discussion to continue as long as needed to arrive at consensus. Participants used hand signals to communicate across the large crowd, silently registering approval (upward "twinkling") or disapproval (downward "twinkling") of whatever was being said. Participants in GAs could "block" proposals they objected to, which gave veto power to anyone who was strongly moved enough to stop an emerging consensus; although blocks could be overridden by a 90 percent vote.

One example of blocking, and the consensus that was eventually achieved in its aftermath, illustrates how OWS facilitated democratic participation and collective empowerment. In the occupation's second week, a small group presented to the GA a draft "Declaration of the Occupation of New York City," a statement intended to reflect, in its words, "what brought us together." A group of South Asian activists who had just concluded a meeting a few blocks away objected to language in the draft Declaration that conjured a post-racial, post-gender, post-class united "human race." These activists, most of whom had not been to Zuccotti before that evening, raised objections and eventually blocked that language. As Sonny Singh recalled, they "were met with some hostility from the proposer, who was a white guy. The facilitator seemed a little impatient with us as well, explaining that a block has to be an ethical or safety concern: we argued that yes, oppression and 500 years of racism

²¹ The term "prefigurative" refers to political practices that directly embody the type of social relations of the type that a social movement aspires to bring into existence.

²² The tactic has been used in previous protest movements, including the anti-corporate globalization protests around the turn of this century and the anti-nuclear movement.

²³ "Mic checks" were also used as a form of direct action by activists trying to interrupt or stop speeches or events seen as in opposition to Occupy.

is an ethical concern, and erasing that in one swoop is a concern.”

What happened over the next couple of hours became an iconic example of the OWS democratic process, referred to in many later accounts of the Occupation (e.g. Maharawal 2011). The discussion “turned into, very quickly, a racism 101 training,” Singh explained, and the GA eventually came to consensus on a modified version of the text. “We didn’t get any great anti-oppression language in there, but we got the bullshit out. And we got it to a place that everybody could live with it.... So we walked away that night feeling that there’s a lot of really naïve stuff happening here, but this process allows for us to stick our noses in it and shift it in a positive direction. I left feeling very empowered and inspired. It wouldn’t have happened, that document would have been released with that naïve language, if we didn’t show up at general assembly that night. So after that, it felt like a responsibility to keep coming.”

This example illustrates how, in contrast to the “vertical” structures of both mainstream political parties and traditional Left organizations, OWS

embraced “horizontalism.” Matt Presto declared, “Horizontalism is what I see as the one non-negotiable element of Occupy Wall Street. Many people are not used to decision-making that is so direct. It takes a lot of time, and it is not necessarily accessible to everyone, but part of the beauty of consensus is that it’s actually a very natural form of decision-making. Informally we do it all the time. But people see voting as the only legitimate form of decision-making, and it’s hard to undo that conditioning. This horizontal structure is really exciting for people who have never experienced it before. “

“I love that nobody can really take the lead and run things,” said Sandy Nurse, among the many OWS participants for whom this was a novel experience. “I love the process of having points of conversation and not going here and there, and being very focused,” she added. “I love the way that people don’t talk over each other, that we use these other forms of gesture-based communication to talk with each other.”

Others also commented on the empowering aspect of direct democracy. Marina Sitrin, who has written



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extensively on horizontalism in Argentina, pointed to the importance of “the commitment to listening to one another and really hearing each other; the acceptance of the other, seeing yourself in the other, and feeling heard.” Similarly, Nathan Schneider highlighted “the learning that was happening: the sense of having an experience unlike everything that they’d ever felt. You’d just hear this all the time. I’d see people over the course of a week flip 180 degrees politically, and personally. In terms of how they interacted with others, they’d go from being disrupters to participants, learning the value of process, learning how to speak, how to be heard in this context, and having their political horizons expanded. You’d come in with some sense of what was wrong, and then you’d kind of gradually realize how completely broken things are through these conversations.” The GAs, “mic-checks,” and even the decision to eschew official demands allowed for wide-ranging, boundaryless explorations of politics.

Occupy activists understood the consensus-based decision making processes and horizontalism as prefigurative. The same was true of the way in which the occupation of the park itself was structured. The park was organized around the principle of mutual aid, encouraging everyone involved to help support the daily life of the community. Basic needs like food, shelter, medical care, collective sanitation and security were all part of the movement, along with as education and culture. Occupy established working groups to manage each of these tasks, directly replicating the organizational structure of the indigados’ encampments in Spain, and drawing inspiration from the organization in Tahrir Square and the occupation of the State Capitol building in Madison, Wisconsin.

For many OWS participants, this was something new. Sonny Singh recalled, “In most of the other

organizing I had done, I hadn’t seen people coming together to create some sort of mini-society that really reflected our values, rather than just showing up to the meeting or the demo and then going back home. That’s what made me really excited from the outset.” Michelle Crentsil, too, was deeply impressed by this prefigurative aspect of Occupy. “Going to the park and seeing people who don’t know each other sit next to each other, eat food together, free, get medical attention together, free, sleep next to each other, and nobody’s worried! A community was created, and it was just completely open. That was scary and threatening to the powers that be, something that doesn’t really exist anywhere else.” She suggested that this was also part of the motivation for the eventual eviction of the park by the police. “You don’t destroy something that isn’t a threat.” The core of this threat, she suggested, came from the ways in which the mini-society created through the encampment provided the opportunity for its creators to reflect on the nature of the lives they lead and the world they lived in. “You can have your immediate needs met, like food, shelter, even health care, so then you can actually sit about some major issues, which I don’t think happens. So many people don’t have those needs met, so they can’t actually have a conversation about why they’re in the position they’re in.” Marina Sitrin similarly underscored what she saw as an inherent radicalism to the experience created by the prefigurative practices of OWS: “If you really get into the conversation, it’s that you can’t have a democracy with this kind of economic system. That’s what it’s really about when people say, ‘I don’t feel heard, my voice has never been heard before, no one consults me in any decisions that are made.’ It’s a very radical politics coming out of that.”

ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES

A series of organizational challenges emerged during the two months that the Zuccotti encampment remained intact. As word spread about the availability of free food and shelter, New York's homeless population began to join the occupation. OWS welcomed them as part of "the 99%," but their growing numbers presented daunting challenges, not only in regard to providing food and medical care to everyone who needed it but also in regard to the dynamics of the GA meetings. While many homeless people became active and constructive participants in the GA and working groups, others who suffered from mental illness or other challenges proved more difficult to incorporate.

Adding to the complexity, the police also began to infiltrate the movement, following a longstanding pattern of government response to protest movements (Boghossian 2004). It was often difficult to distinguish between police informers and others who created problems in the meetings. "You can never tell who's there intentionally to disrupt and who just actually can't help it and maybe needs some more specialized care," Sandy Nurse explained. "There are people who do things in a very subtle way, they create a negative energy that sucks the energy out of things, and it takes a lot of time to deal with them rather than focusing on the issues at hand. And there's definitely been infiltration."

Apart from infiltration and disruption, the GAs faced problems of sheer numbers. As the movement swelled to the point that hundreds and sometimes thousands of people turned up for the daily meetings, the consensus-based process became increasingly unwieldy. "The General Assembly was great in the beginning because the sense that everyone should speak their piece, participate equally, meant that it was wide open for people to get involved," Jackie DiSalvo,

69 years, a longtime labor activist, commented. "We were very democratic, ultrademocratic, with the horizontalism. The working groups got set up very early, and that was probably the healthiest thing in Occupy, because people really wanted to accomplish things and work together very well. But they were separate from the General Assembly, which was becoming dysfunctional."

Over time, indeed, the GA process deteriorated. Jonathan Smucker commented, "The problem is when you try to make 400 people mic-checking in a park into a functional decision-making structure, which it's just not meant to be. It never did that well. So there's a kind of hyper-democracy, which theatrically expresses some of the values of what this movement is about, but it's not always the most functional thing."

A related concern was the "tyranny of structurelessness," in Jo Freeman (1972)'s famous formulation. As Sonny Singh put it, "Even though people say it's a leaderless movement, you know that there's power somewhere... and people whose voices are more important than

others'." Several of our interviewees argued that in practice, horizontalism often marginalized people of color, women, and sexual minorities. Yotam Marom declared, "Decentralized movements are the easiest for people who are most conditioned to lead to take leadership... kind of charming, mainly white, mainly male." And Michelle Crentsil recalled, "There were a lot of racist things happening, classist things and sexist things happening, homophobic things,

Decentralized movements are the easiest for people who are most conditioned to lead to take leadership... kind of charming, mainly white, mainly male.



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transphobic things. All those things were happening, and people were freaking out because they were like, 'I'm at Zuccotti, this is isn't supposed to happen here!' I saw that also play out in what people were saying is direct democracy or horizontalism. No! You still had leaders, and it was the same people who end up rising in the systems that we're trying to address. We ended up recreating a lot of racist, sexist, classist structures. The people who you would see on TV or as the quote-unquote leaders who are either facilitating the GA or being front and center in any other way shape or form were often white, male and highly educated."

Occupy activists struggled to find solutions to these problems without abandoning their commitment to direct democracy. Isham Christie maintained that OWS "is not leaderless, it's leader-ful, with distributed leadership. Not vertical, not horizontal, we want diagonal!" At the same time, he recognized the

complexities involved. "Popular assemblies speak to the given institutions of the society not working, and so people have to just do it themselves, but there are lots of background factors. Is it rooted in a community? Does the community trust one another? Do they know one another? Is there solidarity tied to being in a specific oppressive situation, or is it just a random group of people? That's what New York is already, the most random group, so throwing them all into a General Assembly to make decisions for the movement, that's pretty tough." Stephen Lerner posed the issue succinctly as "the question of where vertical and horizontal meet."

With such problems in mind, Shen Tong, whose OWS activity focused on organizational issues, declared, "We have to come to terms with gravity, which is hard for a movement that aspired so high and somehow by magic succeeded. It's very hard to recognize there is actually gravity. But if you're serious



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about flying, you'd better recognize it and work with it. We live on Earth! If we want to change this society, we have to develop organizational power." Suresh Naidu agreed. "If Occupy turns into something that actually has legs, it's going to have to get a structure," he declared. This was immediately important given the huge volume of donations OWS received within the first month; requiring decisions about how to spend and allocate the funds. As Naidu put it, "We were like a developing country with a resource curse!"²⁴

The primary structure OWS developed to address the organizational challenge was the proliferation of working groups that developed to focus on particular issues. At the peak, there were over 100 working groups, some of which regularly drew several hundred people to their meetings. The groups varied in form and function, with some using more

traditional "majority rules" processes while others were committed to consensus-based decision making. Even before the eviction, many groups met outside of Zuccotti Park, where they felt they could have more effective, focused meetings.

In October, the Structure Working Group put forward a proposal to create a democratic Spokes Council with representation from all active working groups and caucuses. Intended to create more transparency and accountability, as well as a more consistent decision-making process, the Spokes Council would have no authority or decision-making power but would create a structured space for debate and discussion to inform the GA. The idea was controversial among some activists who feared it would add a layer of hierarchy, but in the end the proposal passed. Each working group and caucus was allowed to appoint one person as a "spoke" to sit in

²⁴ In contrast, Occupy Sandy was widely lauded for the tight organization it brought to distributing contributions and volunteers for storm relief.

a circle with other spokes at each Council meeting, and to maximize participatory democracy, the “spoke” for each group would rotate. The first Spokes Council meeting took place on November 7.

The concerns about structure were quickly eclipsed, however, by the NYPD’s forcible eviction of OWS from Zuccotti Park on November 15. The loss of the park was “heartbreaking,” Cathy O’Neil recalled. But like most of our interviewees, she voiced mixed feelings about the eviction. “Losing Zuccotti Park was good and bad. It was good because there really was stuff that was uncool happening there, and it wasn’t going away. And it was bad because there was no longer a way for an average person to join Occupy.”

Marisa Holmes, who had facilitated dozens and dozens of hours of GAs and other meetings by mid-November, also mulled the contradictions of the eviction: “What did it mean to lose the park? It meant losing this symbolic center of a global movement, and for people who were actually there, it was painful. Any diaspora is painful, and they lost their homes. But it was also this sense of relief and starting over and renewal. And that was really needed at that moment. We were having a lot of internal issues with the park at that point. So I was relieved, personally.”

Shen Tong agreed that the park had given OWS the tactical advantage of “physical proximity. Accessibility. You have to be accessible to people if you want to be a mass movement.” On the other hand, he added, “I don’t think you can rely on the space, because

it can always be taken away.” Tong also suggested that the eviction presented an unique opportunity to address key organizational challenges that the movement faced.

Sandy Nurse highlighted a more problematic consequence of the eviction: “Without the space, class comes back into the organizing. When we had the space, people who had never been to anything were like, ‘I’m in Sanitation now and I’m cleaning up the park,’ or ‘I’m in Kitchen’ or ‘I’m at the info Desk and I’m valued.’ People who had never interacted with each other were interacting, to get stuff done. Without the space, those people don’t have that stability and don’t have that privilege. You start to operate in these small, private spaces again, and there’s exclusion that happens. Class comes right back in your face and it becomes comfortable again.”

Once the physical occupation ended, as Arun Gupta commented, the movement began “falling into a particular type of theater: protestors and police, cameras and conflict. That’s a deadly trap. If it seems to be all about these images of police violence, people think, ‘I’m not going anywhere near that.’ More important, the movement was not about fighting cops, it was and is about ending the rule of capital over our lives, and it did so in a joyous, festive manner. It was infused with righteous anger, but if it becomes nothing but anger, aggression, ‘Fuck The Police’ marches—as in did in many cities post-occupation—most people will be scared away.”

OCCUPY AFTER ZUCCOTTI: CHANGING THE SUBJECT

After the eviction of the park, the movement rapidly fell off the public's radar screen. As Matt Presto remarked, "the media has largely ignored us since the eviction because we don't have that spectacle of the space. It's not as glamorous." Many OWS working groups continued to meet regularly, and the movement's new home at 60 Wall Street—just a few blocks from Zuccotti—was often filled with activity during the weeks and months that followed. But their character changed as many former participants returned home and resumed their old routines. "A lot of people have dropped out because they're trying to find housing," Michele Crentsil told us. "I know some people who came to New York just for the occupation have gone back to wherever they were from to go and find work."

Nevertheless, OWS continued to spawn new initiatives in a variety of venues around the city, including on-going educational seminars held in Union Square, Bryant Park, Washington Square and elsewhere under the "Occupy University" Working Group. In addition, neighborhood GAs began to take shape in the outer boroughs—according to Marisa Holmes, thirteen GAs were meeting around the city in the spring of 2012. In Brooklyn, for example, Occupy Sunset Park provided support for a rent strike waged by a group of predominantly immigrant tenants against a corrupt landlord.

Another ongoing effort was OWS support for unionization drives among bakery workers, organized by the Laundry Workers Center (LWC) with support from the Immigrant Worker Justice Working Group. And a group of labor and worker center activists created a "99 Pickets" project with the goal of getting Occupy activists to support a series of worker organizing campaigns around the city. As Nastaran Mohit, who was active in the Immigrant Worker Justice Working Group, explained, "One of the most

important thing about OWS is the fact that it brings different communities and coalitions together. ROC [the Restaurant Opportunities Center] can organize on its own just so much, and LWC can organize on its own just so much. But OWS has provided this umbrella to bring so many different groups and so many different individuals together."

OWS activists also launched several worker-owned-cooperatives, such as OccuCopy, a printing and design shop, and networks of local farmers in Occupy Farms. Occupy Homes has been organizing against foreclosures throughout 2012. Occupy the SEC and Alternative Banking Working Groups also continue to meet, regularly publishing public commentaries on financial reform proposals.

The "Strike Debt" Working Group is engaged in organizing around student debt. A new group spun off to address debt more broadly, and in November 2012 it launched the "Rolling Jubilee" which collects donations and then uses them to buy up outstanding debt from lenders and collection agencies, and then forgive the debt. By mid-November, the group had raised about \$350,000, enough to purchase about \$7 million in debt.²⁵

OWS activists re-emerged strongly in the public square when they formed "Occupy Sandy," a self-organized effort to assist the victims of Superstorm Sandy in New York and New Jersey. Within a day after the storm hit, Occupy activists were collecting

After the eviction of the park, the movement rapidly fell off the public's radar screen... nevertheless, OWS continued to spawn new initiatives in a variety of venues around the city.

²⁵ See the Rolling Jubilee website at <http://rollingjubilee.org/>



Jenna Pope

donations and sending volunteers to check on neighborhoods and residents. Within a few weeks, the group announced that they had coordinated over 50,000 volunteers, and collected almost \$600,000 in donations.²⁶

A network called InterOccupy now maintains lines of communication and coordination among

²⁶ See <http://rollingjubilee.org/>.

Occupy groups around the country and the world. Commenting on efforts like these, Marisa Holmes articulated a vision of Occupy's potential future: "Going forward we need to build a self-managed alternative infrastructure, a dual power situation. That's my ultimate goal. But that's a lifetime of work. We're seeing the beginnings of that now, and hopefully it will come to fruition."

OCCUPY'S ENDURING IMPACT

O WS can take at least partial credit for a variety of political concessions that took place in late 2011 and early 2012, such as the extension of the New York “millionaires’ tax,” the reversal of Bank of America’s plan to impose new fees on its customers, and the successful blockage of the Stop Online Piracy Act. Locally, it also played a role in stopping several housing foreclosures, helping to create a climate for successful contract bargaining for the city’s giant building services local, SEIU 32B-J, and providing vital support to labor disputes like the one at Sotheby’s. More recently, strikes at Wal-Mart and among warehouse and fast food workers have benefitted from relationships built through the Occupy movement.

Equally important, OWS changed the national political conversation. As Cathy O’Neil observed, “Bloomberg, the Wall Street Journal, Reuters, I read

them every day and the amount of questioning of fairness, equitability, that kind of thing has skyrocketed. It’s no longer sufficient just to look at it from the perspective of the owner of the stocks, you actually have to say, how is this affecting people? Is this reasonable?” So that’s what Occupy has done tremendously well, and just bringing it up as a question, and it’s not going away.”

Indeed, as Figure 6 shows, news media attention to inequality increased dramatically during the Zuccotti Park occupation. Mentions of the term “inequality” in the news fell substantially after the eviction, but have remained higher than in the pre-OWS period.

Many of the activists we interviewed marveled at the extent to which inequality became increasingly central in national political discourse thanks to Occupy. As Jonathan Smucker put it, “Its success to me is in changing the national narrative, naming the huge elephant in the room: economic inequality and



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a political system that's rigged to serve the few at the cost of the many. In a very short time this became the new common sense. The character of news stories and the national conversation just changed. It's not that the conservative narrative went away, but it lost a lot of credibility and stopped being the driving force." Lisa Fithian, similarly, observed, "It changed the national narrative, from their frame of poverty and welfare to our frame of debt, the fact that a small group of people at the top—the 1%—of the capitalist pyramid are stealing and squandering our nation's wealth."

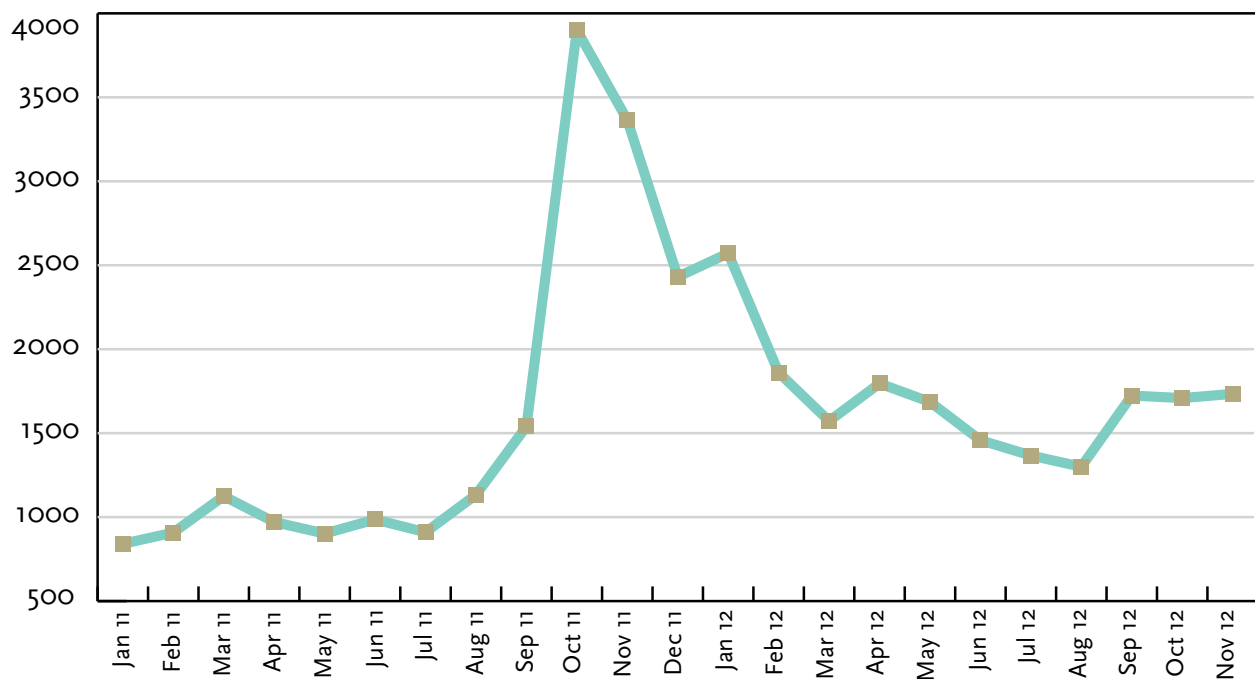
Economist Suresh Naidu commented, "In the U.S., none of that language for the 99 percent existed, so this was great, as far as it captured the public eye. Now in every conversation I have with my colleagues, I can talk about stuff that I could never put on the table before. And I see economics papers now that

start off in their introduction: 'Clearly since Occupy Wall Street economic inequality is a concern.'" The conversation appeared to shift not only among elites but also among ordinary people. "I've been on the train, and I hear somebody talking about the 99% who I've never seen before and I don't know," Michele Crentsil told us. "Anyone and everyone is talking about it."

Although media attention did subside after the eviction (see Figure 6 and Knefel 2012), the broader political discourse continues to be peppered with ongoing references to "the 1%" and to other issues Occupy had raised. The 2012 presidential election campaign frequently referenced these issues as well.

Another, perhaps more enduring way in which the impact of OWS continues to be felt is through the transformation of individual participants who had not previously been politically active. "How fast people

Figure 6. News Mentions of "Income Inequality," January 2011–November 2012.



Source: LexisNexis Academic Database, All News (English).

are learning and how many smart people you have in this movement, it's mind blowing," Amin Husain exclaimed. "There's a synergy, a coming together, people reaching the same conclusion, although they hadn't been in conversation with one another. And they've said that we're the generation that stands for nothing, the apathetic generation!"

"There were all these newly politicized people who were involved. It was crazy how many people I talked to who said, 'Yeah, this is the first thing I've ever been to,' Isham Christie recalled. "There were surprising amounts of people for whom this was their

first political act ever and that was really powerful, it broke through a lot of the cynicism and apathy and transformed so many different people." Jonathan Smucker echoed this point: "There are all sorts of new folks stepping in, working together, and learning a lot. The potential is exciting if folks can

learn the right lessons and decide to stick with it."

Lisa Fithian declared, "People woke up. There was an enormous waking up." Marisa Holmes echoed this point: "Occupy has awakened this popular consciousness that the existing political and economic institutions are illegitimate, that they don't actually represent or reflect people, that another kind of democracy is needed and possible. People have felt really empowered by that."

Others highlighted the radicalization of the newcomers. Suresh Naidu observed, "These were new activists. Clearly this is their first political experience. They would have never considered getting arrested like six weeks ago, for anything. I think they'll take the

idea that you can do that, that political tactics can involve breaking the law, they'll take that into whatever else they do." And Matt Presto reported, "There were a lot of people who were attracted to the movement in the first few weeks who didn't necessarily have any kind of articulated political philosophy but were frustrated with the way things currently are and were looking for new ideas, and it created this space for people to become radicalized. I know quite a few people who were not involved in activism at all before Occupy Wall Street and came in and now identify as anarchists, and didn't really identify as anything before and perhaps were just completely apathetic." And labor organizer Rob Murray observed, "A lot of groups got some new recruits out of Occupy."

Lisa Fithian saw Occupy as part of a "cultural transformation" of lasting significance. "Occupy is and continues to be a space where people can reclaim their humanity. That's more important than we realize, because we have been raised in this culture of inhumanity, death and destruction, which is why we have all these problems. Building a set of relationships and practices and structures that actually support people can transform them for the rest of their lives. It's not about just coming to one protest, we are walking the long road of social and cultural change."

Not only individuals were transformed; new networks were forged as well. "Even if we lost the encampments, the networks and the relationships that are built in the encampment are going to stay," Isham Christie declared. Nathan Schneider agreed, stating, "The connections of the next generation of activists were being formed here. There were so many talented people all in one place, with connections all over the country, meeting each other." Similarly, Suresh Naidu commented on "social networks of people that wouldn't have otherwise recognized each other and known that they were on the same side, and those networks then go off and do all sorts of things. Some of these folks will go into the labor movement, some of them will go into prison stuff, but because

The connections of the next generation of activists were being formed here.

There were so many talented people all in one place, with connections all over the country, meeting each other.

they were all doing this they'll recognize each other later." These networks did not only extend within the Occupy community, but further to the broader community as well. "People out there are really ripe. The American people are absolutely ripe for our message, and I'll tell you, the welcome we've gotten from unions and from workers convinced me," Labor Outreach organizer Jackie DiSalvo argued. Affirming others who are seeking greater organizational coherence in Occupy's next iterations, she told us, "There are many good people, lots of good issues: I would like to see some kind of a structure that enabled us to build a multi-issue movement against the one percent, around the many ways in which the one percent oppress people."

Others commented on how much they valued the personal relationships they had built with other OWS participants. "This is a movement where I have good good friends, who I didn't know anything about a year ago," Michael Ellick told us. "We lived in an environment where nothing else mattered." Cathy O'Neil declared, "I'm picturing myself in 25 years meeting with these guys, I love them! They're like my family. There's that kind of connection that really is wonderful. "

Whether Occupy continues to have a presence "as Occupy" or not, the networks that were formed by its efforts will remain. "That community has held," Michael Ellick told us. "There is a cultural phenomenon called Occupy that's going to keep existing. Chemical bonds grow when I experience moments of joy with you."



Annette Bernhardt

LOOKING FORWARD

Our study of Occupy Wall Street provides a snapshot of the movement at one time and place, and documents in more detail the insights and visions of some of its most active participants. It is too soon for anyone to know whether the movement they helped create will endure. But if it does, it will face several challenges.

One involves the viability of a political frame focused on class inequality without sufficient attention to how other social divisions complicate its vision of the “99%.” Several of our interviewees suggested that the movement needs to do a better job of embracing analyses and practices that explicitly link class to race, gender, sexuality, immigrant status and other elements of social experience. This could help to diversify the movement’s base, and also facilitate building broad coalitions for social change.

Occupy activists also are grappling with the problem of organizational next steps for the movement. They are not united in their vision. Some embrace OWS’s horizontalism, viewing such structures and practices as necessary forms of prefigurative politics, even if it will take time for them to win wide acceptance. Others aim to combine horizontalist principles and practices like participatory democracy with “leaderful” structures that involve more vertical processes of decision-making. Still others focused not on the structure of Occupy itself, but rather on the organizational lessons that Occupy offers the pre-existing political groups that they came from or in which they are currently active.

A related set of challenges for the broader Occupy movement is where they will work. This has a literal component: given the government’s coordinated camp closures and ongoing vigilance, the public space seized by the movement is unlikely to be reclaimed. But the “where” is broader too. What political arenas and issues are best suited to pursuing OWS’ goals?

Many activists we spoke with, and a majority of our survey respondents, were members of community organizations, unions, and social justice organizations whose work “reflects the issues raised by OWS.” Will these groups work together differently as a result of the new networks forged during OWS?

Like their counterparts in Spain, Egypt and Wisconsin, OWS activists also are grappling with the question of whether, and if so how, to link their movements to electoral politics and efforts to win policy changes through traditional political means. In Spain, the indignados rejected any affiliation with political parties outright, reflecting their sense of betrayal by the ruling Socialist Party. In Egypt and Wisconsin, direct action protests were ultimately channeled into the electoral arena, but with disappointing results. In the case of OWS, we expect that the movement’s skepticism about electoral work will persist. As recent efforts like Occupy Sandy, Strike Debt and the Rolling Jubilee suggest, activists are more likely to focus their efforts on direct action and mutual aid than on legislative or electoral campaigns.

Many of our interviewees expressed confidence that OWS represented the beginning of a new wave of social movement activity. “Those civil rights guys, they started in 1955. And then the Freedom Rides took off, and it was like an earthquake, and it just kept going,” Suresh Naidu stated. “It takes ten years; a social movement’s lifespan cannot be measured in months. Those civil rights people at the beginning, they looked like they were losing. And they kept trying and they got demoralized and some people dropped out and new people came in and then it got even bigger. Occupy is like that first bump. And everybody thinks that Occupy was the earthquake and I’m like ‘No, let’s be real.’ So that’s why I’m optimistic about it still.”

Jonathan Smucker offered a similar perspective: “I take the long view. I hope that in twenty years we’ll



look back on Occupy Wall Street as an important turning moment. My assessment is that social movements and civic participation generally have been in decline for four or five decades. OWS may be a symbol of that turning around, a symbol of America rediscovering collective action. After a period of low social movement activity for 40 years, we're lacking a lot of infrastructure, capacity, leadership, and skills. It's going to take waves to build that up. There are a lot of people that are learning valuable skills and are becoming really good leaders and organizers.

Whatever form or forms the movement might assume in the future, we are inclined to agree with Mary Clinton's assertion that it will have a lasting impact: "Now the genie's out of the bottle. There's this energy. I don't know if they'll be able to put it back in!" she remarked, adding: "Whether it's under the Occupy brand or not, people are still going to be organizing. Nobody's going away. There's a lot of work to be done, and we're going to continue tackling it, now that we're all connected."

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Name	Occupation	Areas of work within OWS	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Education level
Phil Arnone	Student	Camp, Labor, Immigrant Worker Justice	White	Male	25	In Grad school
Isham Christie	Union staff	Outreach; Social Media; Meta-working group organizer	Native American	Male	26	In MA program
Mary Clinton	Labor organizer	Outreach; Labor Outreach; Social media	White	Female	25	BA
Michelle Crenstil	Labor organizer	Labor; POC; Outreach; Communications	Black	Female	23	BA
Jackie DiSalvo	Retired professor	Labor Outreach	White	Female	69	PhD
Mike Ellick	Reverend	Faith	White	Male	38	Seminary
Lisa Fithian	Trainer; consultant	Direct action	White	Female	50	BA
Janet Gerson	Education Director, International Institute on Peace Education; retired choreographer	Women Occupying Wall Street; Feminist GA	White	Female	64	PhD Candidate
David Graeber	Professor	Planning	White	Male	51	PhD
Arun Gupta	Journalist	Occupy Wall St Journal	South Asian	Male	47	Dropped out of BA/MA program; has culinary school degree
Marisa Holmes	Filmmaker	Facilitation/Structure	White	Female	25	Art school
Amin Husain	Artist	Facilitation, Direct Action, Tidal (the Occupy journal), Plus Brigades	Palestinian	Male	36	JD
Stephen Lerner	Labor Strategist, organizer	Training, strategy for May 12; Beyond May 12 coalition	White	Male	54	High school
Yotam Marom	Teacher	Oct. 15 action; Direct action; Citywide assembly	White	Male	25	BA
Nastaran Mohit	Organizer	Immigrant Workers	White	Female	30	MA
Rob Murray	Organizer	Labor Outreach; planning actions	White	Male	40	BA
Suresh Naidu	Professor	Finance; Education	South Asian	Male	34	PhD
Sandy Nurse	Consultant; researcher	Direct action	Bi-racial	Female	27	MA
Cathy O'Neil	Mathematician; Blogger	Alternative banking	White	Female	40	PhD
Matt Presto	Teacher	Facilitation; Tactical; Safer Spaces	White	Male	25	MA
Nathan Schneider	Journalist	PR working group	White	Male	27	MA
Sonny Singh	Musician, teacher	POC	South Asian	Male	32	MA
Marina Sitrin	Professor	Facilitation; Legal	White	Female	41	JD; PhD
Jonathan Matthew Smucker	Organizer; Trainer; Writer; Founder and Director of Beyond the Choir	Press Relations, Movement building, Occupy Homes	White	Male	34	BA
Shen Tong	Founder and president of a technology company	Organization Working Group; Messaging cluster	Asian	Male	40s	Postgraduate degree

APPENDIX B: METHODOLOGY

1. In-Depth Interviews

Our goal in selecting the 25 respondents with whom we conducted in-depth interviews was to include core Occupy Wall Street activists from a variety of working groups, and to capture a demographically diverse group in regard to gender, age, and race/ethnicity. We were particularly interested in interviewing people who had been involved in OWS prior to September 17, 2011, although some of our respondents became involved later. We attempted to capture a range of perspectives and experiences, including some individuals who were active in OWS yet critical of the movement.

We began by creating a list of key activists based on information gleaned from articles about OWS in newspapers, magazines and on-line; the list of working groups on the New York City General Assembly website (<http://www.nycga.net/>); as well as our participant observation in Occupy activities and visits to Zuccotti Park. We also used “snowball sampling,” asking respondents at the end of each interview to suggest names of other activists for us to interview. Most of the people we contacted for interviews agreed to participate; however, there were six individuals who either did not respond to our communications, or scheduled interviews that were later cancelled.

Interviews ranged between 45 minutes and 2 hours. All of them were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the excerpts included in this report were sent to interviewees for review.

2. Survey Methodology

Drawing on work by Walgrave (2007) and Walgrave and Verhulst (2011), we designed a methodology to conduct a random sample survey of OWS protest participants in the May 1, 2012 rally and march in New York City. We recruited 47 interviewers, mostly graduate students (and the three of us also conducted some survey interviews ourselves). All of them were

required to attend two three-hour training sessions where they became familiar with this methodology and conducted role-playing and practice interviews. The interviewers were carefully instructed on how to maximize objectivity in regard to both respondent selection and to the way they presented the questions to respondents.

We had designed our survey instrument earlier in the spring and pre-tested it at a smaller OWS rally. We made further refinements to the instrument after the training sessions, based on the practice interviews.

We divided the rally and march space into geographical segments and instructed interviewers to interview every tenth person in their assigned segment. In this manner our team of 50 interviewers completed 729 valid interviews.

Occupy/May Day activities were scheduled to take place throughout the day, but we focused our efforts on the large rally and march planned to start at 4 pm in Union Square. We approached this in two parts. First, we divided the Union Square area into six sections, based on our knowledge of where the rally stage was located, and where interest groups and organizations were scheduled to coalesce. We created six teams of surveyors, and assigned each to an area. The team of surveyors was instructed to divide up inside their area, to walk in a prescribed direction, and to count off to the tenth person. The tenth person was asked to participate in the survey. From there, they were instructed to continue following the prescribed pattern, approaching each tenth person, and conducting the survey.

The teams were instructed to move in varied, specific directions, so that they would then be in place to begin marching with the crowd, with teams dispersed from the front to the back of the march. The teams were then asked to follow another pattern of walking, still approaching each tenth person. The teams marched with the march for the duration of the

march to Wall Street. Surveyors completed their work at approximately 8 pm.

Surveyors were given strict instructions to walk in their prescribed direction and approach the tenth person every time, with the goal of minimizing the impact of interviewer bias, a common problem with this methodology (Walgrave and Verhulst 2011).

We collected 729 surveys. Spanish speaking surveyors completed 5 surveys in Spanish. In addition, 211 people who were approached by interviewers refused to participate. Another 16 were approached but not surveyed because they did not speak English, and 9 were not interviewed because they were under age 12, or were not at Union Square as participants but as vendors or tourists. Those who refused to participate were slightly more female, younger, and white than those who did participate, but none of these differences was statistically significant. However, the refusal rate during the rally was 29 percent, compared to 18 percent during the march, which is a statistically significant difference. The overall refusal rate of 22 percent is also somewhat higher than the average reported for this kind of face-to-face protest survey, as reported by other researchers. Walgrave (2007) states that cooperation rates “always surpassed 80 percent.” Walgrave and Verhulst (2011) note that the highest acceptance rates were in surveys where interviewers were allowed to choose their own respondents, but our refusal rate was higher than they report for surveys in which (as in our case) interviewers were required to follow a strict procedure for selecting respondents.

APPENDIX C: SELECTED DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FOR OWS SURVEY RESPONDENTS AND NEW YORK CITY RESIDENTS, 2011-12.

		New York City Residents ^a	OWS Respondents Residing in NYC (n = 527)	All Respondents (n = 727)	"Actively Involved" Respondents (n = 324)
GENDER	Male	47.6	51.4	55.3	54.8
	Female	52.4	47.1	42.3	41.7
AGE ^b	Under 30 years	28.0	35.2	37.1	39.7
	30 years or more	72.0	64.6	62.9	60.3
RACE/ ETHNICITY	Hispanic/Latino (of any race)	28.8	10.6	10.1	9.2
	Non-Hispanic White	33.1	62.1	62.2	66.6
	All Whites	46.0	63.2	63.5	67.8
	Non-Hispanic African American	22.8	8.0	8.7	5.5
	All African Americans	26.4	9.0	9.6	6.5
	Non-Hispanic Asians	12.7	4.6	5.4	4.2
	All Asians	13.8	4.6	5.4	4.2
PLACE OF BIRTH	U.S.- born	62.8	80.6	80.3	84.4
	Foreign born	37.2	19.4	19.7	15.6
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT	HS degree or GED (25+)	24.9	7.4	7.9	6.4
	Some college (25+)	20.6	7.7	8.9	8.9
	College degree (25+)	20.1	38.7	38.5	39.0
	Graduate degree (25+)	14.0	40.3	40.7	40.8
	Currently enrolled in college or graduate school	8.2	20.4	20.8	21.7
LABOR FORCE STATUS ^c	Employed (≥ 16 years ; with jobs as a percent of labor force)	90.4	90.4	90.3	92.0
	Unemployed (≥ 16 years; jobless and looking for work)	9.6	9.6	9.7	8.0
HOUSEHOLD INCOME	< \$25,000	29.2	7.9	8.2	8.4
	\$25,000 to \$49,999	21.3	19.3	19.6	20.1
	\$50,000 to \$74,999	15.7	23.7	22.1	24.0
	\$75,000 to \$99,999	10.5	13.6	14.5	10.1
	\$100,000 to \$199,999	16.9	29.0	28.7	27.9
	\$200,000 or more	6.6	6.6	6.9	9.5
UNION DENSITY ^d	Union members	22.3	32.1	32.4	28.8
OCCUPATION	Blue collar	16.4	6.9	7.5	4.7
	Office, sales and service	43.8	16.9	16.3	15.7
	Education	6.6	20.2	20.7	23.9
	Management, business and financial	12.4	4.2	4.1	4.1
	Arts and entertainment	3.4	12.6	12.0	12.3
	Other professional	17.5	34.4	33.9	33.6

^a Data in this column are from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2011 American Community Survey, with the exception of the section on labor force status.

^b Our survey respondents were 15 years or older; thus for purposes of comparison, the data shown for New York City include only those age 15 or older.

^c Labor force data for New York City are from the New York State Department of Labor, Occupational Wages. <http://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/lswage2.asp>

^d The union density data for New York City shown are from Milkman and Braslow's (2012) analysis of U.S. Current Population Survey data, which is based on the average of the twelve months of 2011 and the first six months of 2012.

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Many other individuals contributed to this highly labor-intensive project. Shoshana Seid-Green transcribed all our in-depth interviews, and Lynne Turner helped us with data entry and cleaning. Stacey Luce patiently and expertly did the layout and graphic design work on both our survey instrument and this report. Thanks to Annette Bernhardt, Seann Patrick Cram, Michael Gould-Wartofsky, Scott Lynch and Jenna Pope for their photographs.

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